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Sexualities 2013 16: 915

DOI: 10.1177/1363460713508904

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When religious ‘mommy bloggers’ met ‘mommy porn’: Evangelical Christian and Mormon women’s responses to *Fifty Shades*

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Abstract

While some conservative religious women have rejected *Fifty Shades of Grey* as contrary to their values and beliefs, others have embraced it. This article analyzes commentaries and reflections on the book series in US evangelical Christian and Mormon women’s blog communities, and shows how many of these women find value in the books because of their personal, cultural, and religious significance. I argue that attention to the reading strategies employed by evangelical and Mormon women in relation to *Fifty Shades* demonstrates a complex set of responses to ‘secular’ culture as well as ongoing negotiations of gender, sexuality, and authority within these conservative religious traditions.

Keywords

Blogging, evangelicalism, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, hermeneutics, Mormonism, religion

Last summer, one English Lake District hotel attracted a great deal of media attention by announcing that it was replacing the standard Gideon Bibles in the nightstand drawer with copies of EL James’s racy bestselling novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, hence ‘substitut[ing] one inspiring tale of bondage and suffering for another,’

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as one commentator put it (Waldman and Allen, 2012). Hotel owner Jonathan Denby explained the decision in his blog this way:

Tonight millions of women will be curling up in bed with a good book and you can bet your life it won't be the Bible. More likely than not it will be *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I haven't read the book yet – I'm not in the target audience – but I'm told it's a ripping good yarn and everyone who's in the target audience loves it. This made me wonder about the sense of providing a book, the Gideon Bible which no-one reads, and many dislike, in the bedside cabinet of our hotel bedrooms, instead of a book which everyone wants to read, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*. (Denby, 2012a)

Denby had been planning to replace the Gideons since purchasing the 40-room inn from its Methodist owners 10 years previously. He had nearly settled on *Atlas Shrugged* until the unlikely blockbuster *Fifty Shades* sent heart rates and book sales soaring in the spring and summer of 2012 and came to seem the more obvious choice. *Fifty Shades* became the bestselling book in Britain of all time, with e-book and print sales topping 5 million by summer's end, not to mention the 40 million plus copies it has sold worldwide to date.¹ In framing this as an issue of hospitality and consumer choice, Denby carefully clarified that he was retaining several copies of the Gideon Bible at the front desk so that hotel guests who wished to read it instead could simply ask for it. But he also clearly thought of his decision as yet another way in which the processes of secularization were inexorably moving forward, in England at least.² 'In this secular age,' he said, 'it seems distinctly odd that anyone would expect to find a religious book in a hotel bedroom' (Denby, 2012a).

In a later blog post Denby reflected on a striking distinction between UK and US responses to the media attention generated by his action. Those he encountered in the UK took an 'overwhelmingly favorable' view of the change (aside from the local vicar who called it a 'great shame'); he reported that people found it amusing and 'almost no one has been offended,' save the one English guest who complained that the book was *missing* from the room, because the previous guest had apparently absconded with it. American religious reactions were quite different. The hotel received at least 85 negative emails from the USA, and of these, half minced no words, threatening to cancel potential future bookings and conference stays, calling him a 'puppet of Satan,' and suggesting that unless Denby repented, the hotel would be 'destroyed by fire, flood, or pestilence' in the near future (Denby, 2012b).³

While it is certainly true that some reactions to *Fifty Shades* did follow a similar pattern of secular appreciation vs. religious approbation, in this article I challenge this account by examining responses to *Fifty Shades* by conservative religious women in the USA who participate in online blog communities written for women by women, many of whom are mothers. What happens when 'mommy blogs' meet 'mommy porn'? How do conservative religious women read the Bible and this very popular work of erotic fiction *together*, and do they view these texts as conflicting or as complementary? What reading strategies and

resources from their religious traditions are employed in the process? My analysis reveals a set of varied responses to *Fifty Shades*, both positive and negative, among conservative religious women readers of the books, and sheds light on the hermeneutic strategies employed by US evangelical and Mormon women to negotiate tradition and popular culture on the matter of gender and sexuality.

Religious blogs are one facet of the constellation of new affordances in the realm of religion/spirituality made possible by new media, a constellation referred to by some religion and media scholars as 'digital religion' or 'networked religion' (see Campbell, 2010, 2012; Hoover, 2006; Hoover and Echchaibi, 2012). Religious bloggers use their blogs for a number of purposes, including 'chronicling their spiritual journey, offering a prophetic voice in relation to a personally defined religious mission, or using the forum for apologetics [defenses of their faith] and occasionally for venting on religious debates' (Campbell, 2012). I analyze blogs as public textual productions addressing matters of personal significance to their authors and audiences in a way that interlinks individual and community religious identities. Yet my approach also raises questions about researcher ethics as identified by, among others, Busse (2009). I approach the blogs included in this analysis as ongoing public conversations held among members of a loosely configured community of authors and readers, united around a shared religious identity. I will identify authors and commenters as they self-identify. I attend to context by following the blogs longitudinally to gain a thorough sense of authorial purpose, reader–author interaction, and overlapping publics. I have selected a small but representative number of US evangelical Christian and Mormon women's blogs, each of which employs the blog platform in order to engage in serious public discussion of a book series and a topic that institutional authorities in their respective traditions consider taboo; hence, blogs represent a 'safe space' for these women as wives and mothers to conduct these sensitive discussions. Seeing how blogs function in this particular case demonstrates that blogs are an important source for scholarly analysis of religious women's voices and opinions, particularly in communities like the US evangelical and Mormon ones where women's authority, leadership, and sexual self-determination are ongoing topics of debate.

Constituting readers and/as subjects

One of the most fascinating aspects of the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon is the proliferation of journalistic hypotheses linking sales of the series with supposed new insight into adult female sexuality, including numerous invocations of Freud's 'great question': 'what does a woman want?' The unexamined assumptions in media coverage are that female sexuality has been heretofore both mysterious and repressed, and that the books are a source of both this knowledge and the freedom it brings. Publicity around *Fifty Shades* tends to enact exactly this kind of perceived journey from repression to revelation in its representation of both the

author and the millions of women who are, as one commentator put it, 'reading the hell out of' her naughty trilogy (Smolinski, 2012). For many journalists, it is as if the topic that frustrated Freud, what he termed the 'dark continent' of adult female sexuality, can now finally be satisfyingly addressed once and for all by journeying to the apparently previously undiscovered corners of women's psyches that this 'raw' work of a first time novelist in 'midlife crisis' purports to finally reveal, in all of its unexamined heteronormativity.⁴ If this is so, we have to conclude, as many of the commenters do, that what women (really) want is to be dominated by emotionally unavailable, controlling yet devastatingly handsome twentysomething billionaires with helicopters, bondage rooms, and secret pasts of childhood abuse. Left unaddressed, in addition to the heteronormativity, are the assumptions at the root of the notion that a bestselling sexual fantasy is revelatory.

As Foucault demonstrated in *History of Sexuality*, volume I, sexuality in the modern West has become naturalized as a discourse of truth and interior revelation. He describes the processes by which the discourse of 'sexuality' developed in the 19th century as a technique for the production of truth, 'situated at the point of intersection of a technique of confession and a scientific discursivity.' As the 'question of sex' (for it is always a question) develops in the modern West according to Foucault, we see the emergence of two mutually conditioning processes: 'we demand that sex speak the truth' and 'we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness' (Foucault, 1990: 68–69). The claim to silence and injunction to secrecy always operate with a corresponding impetus to confess and reveal. Confession of one's desires thus becomes a technique for the production of truth, the truth of the self, which the repressive hypothesis tells us has been hidden and now must be uncovered and confessed as an exercise of ultimate freedom. The discourse around *Fifty Shades*, the book, its author, and its reception, is constitutive of a type of female sexual subject, one made free to discuss and explore her desires.

Part of this discourse has to do with the genealogy of the series itself and its origination in the depths of James's *Twilight* fanfiction fantasy.⁵ James, a former TV executive, wife and mother of two who had done some television writing but had never published a novel before, said by way of explanation of her inspiration for the series, that she was 'stunned' at the book's runaway success: 'This is my midlife crisis, writ large. All my fantasies in there, and that's it' (James in Eugenios, 2012). Frequently described in the media as somewhat of a curiosity, it is the apparent inscrutability and perceived incompatibility between James's normal outward appearance and inner kinky fantasies that adds to the appeal of the book for journalists and commentators. Who is writing such naughty things? Who are the women reading it? What will this mysterious author and her readers reveal and confess about the esoteric nature of female desire?

Fifty Shades foregrounds the question of desire in its portrayal of the heroine, Anastasia Steele, a beautiful yet sexually inexperienced 21-year-old college student who is somehow immediately irresistible to suave young telecommunications

billionaire Christian Grey. Ana's desire is not simply awakened and reciprocated but *first recognized as such* only through her interactions with Christian:

I have never felt this way about anyone. My hormones are racing. My skin tingles where his thumb traced over my face and lower lip. I'm squirming with a needy, achy...discomfort. I don't understand this reaction. *Hmm... Desire*. This is desire. This is what it feels like. (James, 2012: 68)

It is precisely Ana's desire and consent that enable the story to move forward from start to finish. Ana's thoughts and feelings within the framework of safety, mutual desire, discovery, and consent that the book establishes are foregrounded throughout the narrative, and for many women readers, despite the BDSM elements, this is what makes the book more like a 'romance novel' as opposed to standard erotica.

Fifty Shades has been dubbed 'mommy porn' by the media for its appeal to adult women in the 30–50 age bracket, many of them wives and mothers. But what's behind the 'mommy porn' name? Like 'mommy blogs', the name signals marketing, genre, and audience: *Fifty Shades* has introduced many women with children 'who usually read run-of-the-mill literary or commercial fiction to [the genre of] graphic, heavy-breathing erotica' (Bosman, 2012). A *New York Times* article observes, 'Women just feel like it's O.K. to read it. It's taboo for women to admit that they watch pornography, but for some reason it's O.K. to admit that they're reading this book' (Bosman, 2012). Second, technology has made it 'o.k.' for moms to read *Fifty Shades* precisely because they can do so discreetly in e-book form. Whatever else mommy porn is, it has to be portable, private, and easily downloadable so that one can read it at the park and the pediatrician's office. Technology is also responsible for much of the book's success via social media. Third, feminism meets fantasy in the book's unlikely appeal. Do women really secretly want to be Anastasia, or is it that they are just tired of resisting attempts to control them in real life, as *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd wonders in a recent op-ed? (Dowd, 2012) She's not the only one. 'There are all these supermotivated, smart, educated women saying this was like the greatest thing they've ever read,' says a 38 year old Scarsdale, NY lawyer. 'I don't get it. There's a lot of violence, and this guy is abhorrent sometimes' (quoted in Bosman, 2012). This apparent contradiction lies in the so-called fantasy of submission, which commentators surmise may exist proportionally to women's educational and career achievements. The more successful the woman and the more control she has in real life, the more she desires the fantasy of *losing* control, so that:

when you're a young mom and everyone depends on you for everything – your husband, your mother – the idea of having someone take care of you and telling you what to do, even in a twisted sense, it rocks [your] boat. (Donaldson James, 2012)

And, indeed, this is the interpretation of James herself, who explains the book as the culmination of her own submissive fantasy: 'Once you're in charge of your job,

your house, your children, getting the food on the table, doing all of this, all of the time, it'd be nice for someone else to be in charge for a bit maybe' (James in Eugenios, 2012).

Conservative US religious women's responses

So, are conservative religious women in the USA reading the *Fifty Shades* books? The short answer is yes, but why and how they are reading, or choosing not to, are the more interesting questions. In what follows I will survey a sampling of evangelical Protestant and Mormon women's reactions to the trilogy, showing how they approach the topic from different contexts yet frame their readings in similar ways. I argue that these women's reading strategies are understood in terms of the *effects* they believe reading the books will have in their lives, for them personally as well as for their relationships with the divine and with their husbands. The most important thing to understand about the two groups' responses to *Fifty Shades* is that they are framed within a context of heterosexual, monogamous marriage as normative, and hence the books are evaluated according to whether they strengthen or undermine that ideal.

Evangelicalism, sexuality, and popular culture

Evangelical Protestant Christianity in the USA is a broad and diverse movement with historical roots in the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. Approximately one-quarter to one-third of the US population identifies as evangelical, according to recent Pew Forum data.⁶ Definitions of evangelicalism abound (see e.g. Balmer, 2006, 2010; Bebbington, 1989; Noll, 2004), with the movement being loosely defined by the following features: an emphasis on a personal experience of conversion, or being 'born again'; the bible as a guide for all matters of life (often biblical literalism and sometimes though not always inerrancy); a theological emphasis on 'grace' alone as necessary for personal salvation; and a focus on activism and evangelism at home and abroad.

US evangelicals have long maintained a complicated relationship with popular culture: while on the one hand they employ a hermeneutics of suspicion toward much of the *content* of 'secular' culture, on the other hand they have been happy to embrace any of the *forms* and technologies of secular culture if these will serve as effective tools of evangelism. This attitude creates an awareness of and openness to popular culture among American evangelicals, yet one that is tempered by criticism; they are 'in the world but not of the world' as they like to say. Further, the lack of any centralized institutional hierarchy among US evangelicals means that there is no single authoritative ecclesiastical voice with the power to demarcate what they may properly read, watch, or listen to. Instead, there are a number of competing voices establishing the parameters of evangelical engagement with culture, from one's local pastors to national leaders, but there is always also the Protestant principle of the individual right to conscience, spiritual discernment,

and biblical interpretation. This means that evangelicals individually develop strategies of reading and interpretation in relation to the cultural products they consume, informed by their understandings of scripture, theology, culture, and effective witness. It is not surprising then that evangelical Christian women's responses to *Fifty Shades* span a spectrum of negative and positive reactions.

On matters of sexuality, US evangelicals tend to be conservative, abjuring a host of behaviours they regard as 'sexual libertinism' (homosexuality, abortion, premarital sex, adultery, and so on) but emphasizing a positive understanding of sex *if* exercised solely within the biblically-mandated confines of traditional heterosexual monogamous marriage. Hence it is not surprising to find evangelical women as active consumers of evangelical romance fiction, a genre aptly described by Neal as embracing the familiar plot structure of the (secular) romance novel, yet differing in that it maintains standards of appropriate chastity, subordinates the heterosexual relationship at the center of the book to the main characters' relationship with God, and requires some kind of 'religious action' (e.g. 'conversion, forgiveness, or obedience') to resolve the novel's dramatic tension (Neal, 2006: 5). Evangelical sex manuals, intended for the eyes of married heterosexual adults only, maintain a similarly positive view of sexuality if exercised within its proper limits, with the texts typically beginning 'by proving what are scripturally sound desires and [then] linking those desires closely to what the authors contend are "natural" sexual behaviors' (DeRogatis, 2005: 107–108). But it is not just that desire and sexuality are celebrated by evangelicals as positive components of healthy heterosexual marriage relationships; it is also that desire, romance, and erotic language are all frequently employed as metaphorical and literal ways of describing women's relationship with Jesus in evangelical women's devotional literature, as women are encouraged to 'surrender' to a male divinity who actively desires them, sometimes with explicit sexual language that can even include S&M references (Roncace and Whitehead, 2009). Thus, there is plenty of sex-positivity in US evangelicalism, if one knows where to look.

But despite these elements in the tradition, evangelical women bloggers who choose *not* to read *Fifty Shades* frame their choices as a matter of individual discernment and piety with a focus on consequences. While some women see beneficial effects in engaging with the products and messages of popular culture, bloggers critical of the books see only *negative* effects: their relationships with their husbands, personal struggles with lust, and most importantly their relationships with Christ will suffer as a result of consuming a distorted and seductive portrayal of sexuality. Dannah Gresh, mother of three and founder of an evangelical chastity movement for girls, lists several reasons why women should not read *Fifty Shades* (it's violent, pornography, and so on), and invokes the Bible as authority for her decision (Gresh, 2012). Similarly, Crystal Renaud, founder of Dirty Girls Ministries, a nonprofit organization devoted to helping women struggling with pornography, blogs about evangelical Christian women's need to 'guard their hearts' from the dangerous messages and effects of the book, which can serve as a 'gateway' to pornography and 'sexual addiction' (Renaud, 2012).⁷ For Renaud,

women must keep their desires in check by not consuming materials uncharacteristic of biblically prescribed female sexuality.

Blogger Mary Kassian offers a theological argument for not reading *Fifty Shades*: it provides an 'incorrect' view of male–female relationships. 'Christ is not into domination, control, abuse, and humiliation,' she says flatly (Kassian, 2012). Though like many conservative evangelical women she is an advocate of the doctrine of male headship and wifely submission in marriage (see e.g. Griffith, 2000 [1997]), modeled on the Christ–church relationship, for her this does *not* equate to the BDSM submission depicted in *Fifty Shades*. For Kassian, the books promote a 'distorted' notion of womanhood and of submission that is at odds with the Bible:

A wife's submission is first and foremost to Christ. The biblical directive to submit does not turn women into brain-dead, passive, weak-willed doormats who acquiesce to the whims of dominant, controlling men... The Lord doesn't want His daughters to be wilting, weak-willed, wimpy women who welcome and enjoy abuse. BDSM perverts and mocks the beauty of what true submission is all about. (Kassian, 2012)

For evangelical Christian women who object to *Fifty Shades*, then, the issues are fundamentally about incompatibility: the books are incontrovertibly at odds with biblical teachings about sexual morality, normative gender roles, and marriage. Faced with these incompatibilities, *Fifty Shades* must be rejected.

But other evangelical women reach different conclusions. Julia Stronks, professor of political science at Whitworth College in Spokane, WA, is a regular contributor to the 'Think Christian: No Such Thing As Secular' blog, a project of the evangelical Christian Reformed Church in North America.⁸ In a post entitled 'Do women really want 50 Shades of Grey?', Stronks frames the issue as not simply a matter of private discernment but of public engagement:

Should Christians read these books? I think Christians who choose to read the books should start talking openly about their responses to *50 Shades*. If we believe that Christ's redemption shapes our response to culture, we cannot be afraid of what our culture is talking about. (Stronks, 2012)

Stronks believes that Christians *should* be engaging in larger cultural conversations about sexuality, and views *Fifty Shades* as 'unique in the way it has captured our culture's attention,' particularly in the sense that it promises revelation about female sexuality. For Stronks, the book is troubling in three ways: it perpetuates the fantasy that with love and time, a woman can 'rescue' a troubled man; it depicts (all) sexual relationships as modeled on a basic paradigm of dominance and submission ('sex [is] something that men do to women'); and the public discussion surrounding the book assumes that a fantasy novel can reveal how women actually want to be treated. Pointing out statistics showing that one in five American women will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetimes, she argues that

'we do ourselves no favors by insisting that dominance fantasy and violence have no relationship to one another.' Stronks therefore outlines an approach to the books as popular cultural products with which Christians should not only engage but also use to lead larger discussions about unhealthy models of sexuality in US culture (all from Stronks, 2012).

A similarly positive yet not uncritical response is exemplified by blogger Jonalyn Fincher. In her post 'Sex, Food and Fifty Shades of Gray [sic],' she writes that the series is being hailed as 'the jump start to mommy libido,' and 'if you haven't had good sex in years you will do a happy swan dive into *Fifty Shades of Grey*' (Fincher, 2012b). But if women are 'sexually hungry,' is *Fifty Shades* good 'food' for them? 'It all depends,' she writes, on the *object* of that desire. 'The key ingredient to keeping marriage hot is desire,' but the proper gauge of a good sex life is desire for one's *spouse*, not desire in general. If the book leads your desire away from your husband to a fictional or real version of Christian Grey, it's time to put it down. In this sense, *Fifty Shades* 'is easy arousal because it doesn't ask anything. You simply consume,' she says, 'But I want my sexual cravings met with the real thing,' her husband (Fincher, 2012b). On this reading, *Fifty Shades* is like the McDonald's of female desire, beckoning its women readers with its seductive yellow and red signs and promises of millions served. But instead of seeking unhealthy fast food in the form of fictional erotic fantasy, Fincher advises women to opt for the 'real thing' in the form of divinely ordained, biblically based heterosexual marriage.

But there is another reason that Fincher thinks evangelical Christian women might want to read *Fifty Shades*: because it may provide an opening for them to explain or defend the faith to non-Christians, a central task of Christian apologetics (Fincher, 2012c). Noting that the book (along with its author and readers) is an 'easy target' for Christians because it 'spreads erotica and BDSM into popular culture,' Fincher suggests that Christians regard it as an 'opportunity instead of a threat,' a means of engaging larger cultural discussions of sexuality and desire (Fincher, 2012a). On her reading, the book's popularity represents a deep need among women to 'share their stories of sexual desire and frustration,' and generates an 'awareness of their brokenness, their thirst for healing,' along with a motivation to seek this healing (Fincher, 2012a). For Fincher, these conversations constitute the important work of present-day defenders of Christianity, and this work can't be accomplished without a willingness to engage and take seriously popular cultural products like *Fifty Shades* and the complicated issues it raises.

Mormonism, chastity, and sexual testimony

Much has been made of the connection between the *Twilight* series and the Mormon faith of its author Stephenie Meyer. Mormon theological themes abound in the book, such as the problem of 'overcoming the natural man,' symbolized in the figure of Edward who must struggle against unthinkable temptation, but what has attracted the most attention is the strict code of sexual ethics practiced by the series' two central characters, Bella and Edward.⁹ Though both series

are fueled by desire, the primary difference between the *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades* series lies in their approach to sexuality:

Fifty Shades dispenses with the supernatural plotline but also the main erotic draw of the *Twilight* books: the fact that the characters can't or won't have sex. Unencumbered by Mormon sexual ethics, pacing, or a YA [Young Adult] classification, EL James is free to go straight to the [sex]. (Smolinski, 2012)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), popularly known as 'mormonism', a restorationist religious movement originating in the 19th century in the USA with deep ties to the Christian tradition, differs in significant respects from evangelical Protestantism but shares similar commitments to moral conservatism and evangelistic activism. Mormon sexual ethics are grounded in the Law of Chastity, a guiding principle for Mormon behaviour, encompassing modesty in dress, thoughts and actions as well as all aspects of sexual behaviour. The Law of Chastity teaches that sexual relations are permitted only in the context of heterosexual marriage, and that humans are constantly subject to temptation to break the Law via 'pictures, movies, stories, jokes, music, and dances that suggest immoral acts,' including what the First Presidency (the prophetic and institutional head of the church on earth) terms 'pornography' (LDS, 2011).

For many Mormon women bloggers, *Fifty Shades* is off limits because it violates church teaching, particularly the proscription in the Law of Chastity against 'stories...that suggest immoral acts.' 'Karissa,' a contributor to the 'Empowering LDS Women' blog, characterizes the books as 'pornography' that is 'harmful to women,' and many commenters on her post agree (Karissa, 2012). Such criticisms by Mormon women echo those of evangelical women who invoke biblical authority and church teaching to conclude that the book should be avoided because it glorifies sexual immorality, portrays unhealthy, theologically incorrect, and even harmful notions of gender, romance, and sexuality, and is 'pornographic.'

However, many Mormon women bloggers choose to view the book positively. 'The Exponent,' a Mormon feminist blog, featured a summary post about a local Mormon women's book club that read and discussed *Fifty Shades* together. The author of the post first noted that the privacy afforded by e-book technology was crucial to LDS women's ability to read the books, and then summarized a generally positive view of the books by the 20 women in the club in this way: 'On the whole, the books seemed to have increased the libido of the women involved, and most of their partners were thrilled' (50 Shades of Grey – Book Club, 2012). The most important thing about the book, however, was that it opened up a new forum for honest and open discussion about sex among the women present, who represented a wide range of levels of sexual experience, including those with none at all. Noting that the meeting that night was 'originally intended to have a field trip component' involving a visit to a local adult store, which for unstated reasons apparently

did not work out, the author said that several of the women ‘ended up ordering [sex toys and other items] online instead.’ The book had effectively

opened a dialog that is often missing in LDS women’s meetings, a place for us to openly talk about the intimate aspects of our lives with the goal of validating each other and finding ideas to improve our understanding and satisfaction with our sexuality. (50 Shades of Grey – Book Club, 2012)

Stefanie, one of the women present at the book club meeting, commented on her own experience of how reading the book improved her sex life with her husband. I quote at length:

I can not begin to tell you all how educational it was for me. Growing up as a very conservative mormon girl, always being told ‘no, no, no’, when it came to sex and then getting married and being told ‘go, go, go’ has been insanely frustrating! How am I and my spouse suppose[d] to have this amazing sexual relationship when neither of us understands what we’re doing? As a mormon, you’re not suppose[d] to watch porn, read erotica, go to sexual websites, and VERY few of my mormon friends would ever let their walls down long enough to have an honest discuss[ion] about sex. So where the hell am I suppose[d] to turn to, to understand my sexual potential? Now I’m not saying reading an erotic book is the only way, but it worked for me . . . I look forward to sex now, it’s not just me taking care of my priesthood holder at the end of the day. All in all my experience [with the books] has been great. (50 Shades of Grey – Book Club, 2012)¹⁰

As Stefanie’s comment reveals, books like *Fifty Shades* may actually serve the purpose of sexual education and greater sexual satisfaction with their husbands for Mormon women who are raised to obey the Law of Chastity, encouraged to marry young, and lack other sources of information and experience about sex. In that way, the book’s effects do not subvert but rather *strengthen* their ability to follow church teaching in maintaining marital fidelity.

The same book club was also profiled, albeit for very different purposes, in a story for *Fifty Shades of American Women*, a fan magazine for readers of the trilogy published in August 2012 and sold in places like Barnes and Noble, Walgreens, and Wal-Mart. ‘I’m a Mormon, and I Loved It!’ the title of the article rapturously proclaimed, the subheading emphasizing that the young woman who had agreed to be interviewed about her book club discussion of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy was ‘a member of one of the most conservative religions in the world’ (Steed with Knoebel, 2012). The underlying message: if even these ‘most conservative’ Mormons (who also, the article makes sure to note, are having the most sex of any religious group other than Orthodox Jews) are enjoying the book, then what’s stopping you? The article tells readers what these women ‘learned’ from the book, in the form of individual quotations from the interview arranged on the following page in easily digestible pink and purple-lettered soundbites: ‘We quickly realized that a lot of what is in the books isn’t just the author trying to be sensational.

And that helped us. Discussing how many orgasms real women can have in a night is good to hear.' And, 'I found the book empowering for women because it helped me focus on seeing sex as a way to find my limits of pleasure.' Indeed, the 'only thing that changed for me after reading the books is that the Mormon church's view of pornography is harsh,' the interview concluded (all quoted in Steed with Knoebel, 2012). The clear message of the piece, and indeed of the whole magazine, is that *Fifty Shades* is educational, 'empowering' for women, mainstream, and easily available for purchase and consumption.

Commercialism aside, in the context of Mormon women's experiences in a highly patriarchal and hierarchical religious institution, the book generates a kind of conversation and openness that can in fact be revelatory. *Fifty Shades* can be seen as providing an outlet for what Peterfeso (2011) terms Mormon women's 'seximonies.' Peterfeso has described how women's performances of the *Mormon Vagina Monologues* at a Salt Lake City symposium in 2001 created an opportunity for subversion of the traditional 'Mormon rhetorical model of performed testimony,' a personal narrative that LDS men and women are expected to develop based on life experiences and to deliver publicly as often as possible. The LDS Church provides the basic form and content of the testimony: they should in all cases 'attest that God the Heavenly Father exists, that Jesus is the Son of God, that Joseph Smith is God's prophet, that a prophet leads today's church, and that the Mormon Church is true.' (Peterfeso 2011: 37) Yet while Mormon testimony is grounded in the centrality of personal experience, and the church 'encourages women's public testimony on matters such as faith and family, or on issues that reaffirm church teaching,' it remains the case that 'LDS women cannot and do not talk freely about sex.'

The women who participated in the *Mormon Vagina Monologues*, Peterfeso argues, self-consciously saw it as a 'subversive act,' transforming and performing the rhetorical model of testimony as their own sexual testimony, or 'seximony,' and in doing so, substituting their own voices and authority for male priesthood authority. In speaking openly, honestly, and publicly about their sexual experiences as Mormon women, they 'claimed ownership of their own sexual stories' (Peterfeso, 2011: 35). The *Fifty Shades* book club discussion seems to have had a similar effect in providing a venue for and an affirmation of these women's ability to discuss their sexual experiences, 'the good, the bad, and the challenging' (50 Shades of Grey – Book Club, 2012), collectively affirming their sexual testimonies with other women for the first time. Such affirmations of Mormon women's right to speak about *all* of their experiences not only may have positive effects in their own marriages, but also may further their ongoing negotiations of authority in the LDS tradition.

Conclusion

Conservative religious women and mothers *are* reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* and many are reading the hell out of it, complicating the picture that is usually presented of secular appreciation of the books versus religious criticism and censure. While we do see clear examples of objections *to* the books grounded in conservative

religious beliefs (biblically-based morality, proper gender roles, and the Law of Chastity), we also see ongoing conversations facilitated *by* the book among evangelical and Mormon women about *why* they have made their choices, involving the giving and exchanging of public reasons, claims to and sources of authority including the right to individual discernment and the freedom of consumer choice, pragmatic reflections on consequences, the status of an individual believer's relationship to religious law and tradition, and concerns about apologetics and evangelism.

These discussions reveal internal disagreements as well as ongoing negotiations of the respective weights of institutional and traditional authority, scripture, and individual experience in arriving at decisions about what aspects of the vast smorgasbord of popular culture to consume. So, contra Denby, it is not so much that one book is being replaced with another, but that both books, the Bible and *Fifty Shades*, are being read *together*. For some conservative religious women, scripture and *Fifty Shades* complement one another in their positive and educational celebrations and explorations of heterosexual monogamous sexuality. For others, these texts contain antithetical messages and hence *Fifty Shades* must be rejected. In all cases, a nuanced process of textual interpretation and cultural hermeneutics is at work in the individual and group discussions surrounding the books. When mommy bloggers meet mommy porn, desire, sexuality, gender, culture, and religion collide in a rich discussion that provides plenty of 'food' for thought, though it may not satisfy everyone at the table.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and particularly its Director, Professor Stewart Hoover, for invaluable conversations about the issues raised in this article. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments, and Ruth Deller, Bethan Jones, and Sarah Harman, editors of this volume, for their expert guidance and suggestions.

Notes

1. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* remains the top-selling UK book of all time in terms of print copies, with over 4 million sales. As of fall 2012, *Fifty Shades* had sold 3.8 million print copies and 1.5 million e-books in the UK (Singh, 2012). By year's end, over 65 million copies (print and e-book) of the trilogy had been sold worldwide, and James was named the 'publishing person of the year' by *Publishers Weekly* (Deahl, 2012).
2. Some recent studies of secularism with impact on the field of religious studies include Asad, 2003; Connelly, 1999; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008; Lilla, 2007; Taylor, 2007; and Warner et al., 2010.
3. All quotations in this paragraph are from Denby (2012b). Denby also refers to an NBC News.com Travel poll conducted in July 2012 that found that out of almost 32,000 responding, people preferred *Fifty Shades* to the Bible in their hotel rooms by 42% to 37% (the other 19% chose 'another book'). This poll apparently appeared as a sidebar to the Pawlowski 2012 story, although I have been unable to locate it online. I did find evidence of another poll (Brown, 2012) showing that *Fifty Shades* was the book most likely to be left behind in UK hotel rooms.

4. James referred to her book as 'kind of raw' and said she was 'not a great writer' in an April 2012 interview on the *Today Show*, acknowledging the legitimacy of critics who have lampooned *Fifty Shades*' unsophisticated prose (Eugenios, 2012).
5. This basic history of *Fifty Shades* is by now well-rehearsed, but because the fan fiction has been removed from the original site and is no longer accessible via the internet archive, the specific origins of the books, and (for example) a side-by-side comparison of the texts of the original 'Masters of the Universe' fanfic with *Fifty Shades of Grey* the novel are no longer available (see Kellogg, 2012).
6. See, for example, the 2008 Pew Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Forum, 2008).
7. Renaud uses the language of 'addiction' to describe her own eight-year 'struggle' to reconcile her relationship with pornography and sex on the one hand with her faith on the other; she concludes that these are incompatible.
8. The blog 'recognizes contemporary culture – from politics to the arts, from business to science – as falling under God's sovereignty' and seeks to 'engage this God-owned, human-driven world by discussing what it means to live as a Christian within it,' a stance not surprising considering the evangelical denomination's Dutch Calvinist roots (*Think Christian: No Such Thing as Secular*, 2012).
9. Riess (2009) is persuasive on the point that chastity does not exhaust the Mormon themes in the *Twilight* series, and that in fact there are much deeper LDS theological ideas embedded in Meyer's writing that are worthy of consideration.
10. In closing, Stefanie noted that she still proudly holds a temple recommend, evidence of her commitment to and good standing in the LDS Church. In other words, enjoying erotica and being a faithful LDS woman are fully compatible.

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