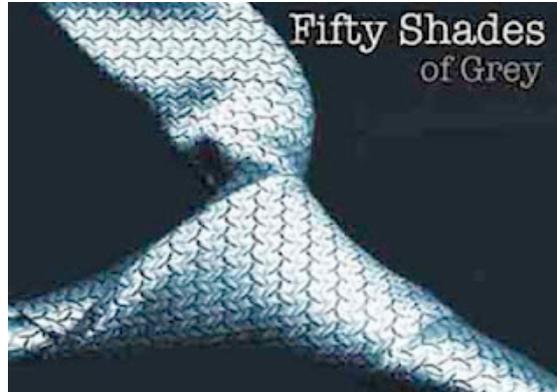

Shelley Leggett

Naughty, Naughty

THIS is not so much a 'book review' but more of a wander around the phenomenon that is this summer's must read – the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. I am well aware I am going to provoke people to write to our Editor and ask is this what Humanism has been reduced to – a review of mummy porn? But I'm brave, and I'm going to do it anyway. Some feminists have asked if this is what the Suffragettes fought for.



Social chat rooms are busy with people talking about *Fifty Shades* and posting pictures of who they think should play Mr Grey in the movie version of the trilogy. I myself received a copy of the book at the behest of one of my sons, who told his dad to buy it for me – “There’s that book the girls are all talking about on Facebook – you should buy it for Mum”. I know we’re liberal but ... I’m his mother, for God’s sake!

Some might say – yes – the freedom to imagine, read and explore what you want to is exactly what they fought for.

First of all, I wouldn’t call it porn. Let’s call it an erotic love story about a very attractive, fabulously wealthy young entrepreneur, Christian Grey, who seduces a younger and innocent college graduate (Anastasia Steele) into having a submissive relationship with him. Although it starts with their mutual lust for each other, the story tells of their deepening, passionate love and the demons he must face along the way. When she moves in to his palatial apartment on the Seattle skyline we get to go with them on night flights in his helicopter ‘Charlie Tango’, wild and wet sea journeys on speed boats and jet skis and trips on fabulous cruisers, all the while anticipating what’s going to happen when they reach their destination. Will she? Won’t she? To cut a long story short – she will. And does. Frequently. In what can only be described as an extraordinarily pioneering fashion for a girl who was an innocent only a couple of pages earlier. She discovers she likes the gentler form of BDSM (go look it up – I’m not doing all the work here) he introduces her to, while her inner goddess keeps us informed of what’s going through her mind while in these situations – ‘My inner goddess is doing the merengue with some salsa moves’, ‘My inner goddess has just done a back flip off the top bunk’.

When he gives her a laptop we get to eavesdrop on their e-flirting, which is at times funny – like the antics of Anastasia’s inner goddess. But he also tells her:

“Don’t waste your energy on guilt, feelings of wrongdoing, etc. We are consenting adults and what we do behind closed doors is between ourselves. You need to free your mind and listen to your body”.

She responds that her body is telling her to run to Alaska – he has after all just introduced her to his ‘playroom’. What? You didn’t think I was going to go into details did you? Read it yourself!

He asked me a couple of days later if I was enjoying it. I didn’t quite know what to say – and then it struck me. He didn’t understand the nature of the book. I ventured, “You do know it’s been called ‘mummy porn?’”. He only choked a little bit, but all was well and we were able to discuss, without going into detail, the merits of BDSM in a novel and whether it is demeaning to women.

And for those of you wondering what this has to do with Humanism, that’s my angle. Is this story bad for women’s image? Does it give out the wrong messages to men about what women want?

Perhaps therein lies the answer. Women are reading it in their millions around the world, outselling *Harry Potter*, and making it the fastest selling paperback of all time. I haven’t heard of any men having read it – yet – but all those women are getting something from *Fifty Shades*. Perhaps it’s because male sexuality has been recognised and accepted for millennia while women have always been led to believe they were meant to be shy and demure – well at least until women’s lib told us we could have it all – job, children, house, holidays ... cooking up fabulous meals at the drop of a hat, making jam, donkey costumes with three days notice for the school nativity and all the while looking fabulous with minimum effort. Not so much having it all as doing it all.

But in Christian Grey we find a man who is wealthy beyond our imaginings, very much in control, who wants to look after his woman’s every need. He hires her a personal shopper (no more: what the hell am I going to wear to work?), security guards who chauffeur her to work (no more: where the hell am I going to park?), takes her round the world on private planes and yachts (no more: how the hell will I find the money to get away from this crap climate for a week?) and when they finally tie the knot he lifts her in her wedding dress, which he has requested she keep on so that he can remove it, out of the chauffeur-driven limousine and up the steps of his own private jet. I climbed into a battered Escort in mine and went to visit

my great aunt in hospital. My inner goddess is now standing with her back to me sulking.

Could it be that in this time of economic uncertainty and some of us 'girls' having now found we have to work until we're 66 that this fabulously wealthy lifestyle might just be more appealing than going around the work merry-go-round six years longer than we were expecting? That just when we thought life was about to get a little easier the rug was pulled out from under us, so what else is there to do now but dream? Well that explains some of us – the sales are apparently mostly driven by middle aged women. But what about the younger women who are now snapping the books up and looking forward to the film premier?

Could it be that in a world where they are equal to men, in theory if not in practice, which is appropriate in the workplace, they find that equality in other relationships is not as satisfying as they'd been led to believe? Actually, that applies to all age groups, come to think of it. Maybe it's nice to acknowledge our male partners just are bigger and stronger and can look after us. That we can relinquish responsibility for our safety knowing someone else is taking care of it. I love being taken by the elbow across the road or having doors opened for me – it makes me feel kind of small in a delicious way.

This may seem a strange analysis given that Mr Grey likes to 'spank' small, brown-haired girls. But what I understand from reading these books, and the author E.L.James (real name Erika Mitchell) did research this, is that BDSM participants have a lot of trust in each other and, in fact, talk about limits and what each wants from the relationship, which would serve a lot of ...em ... 'ordinary' couples well. And in *Fifty Shades of Grey* Anastasia leaves the beautiful man she adores when he goes too far and hurts her, thereby putting herself in the driving seat of the relationship and bringing the delectable, ever so slightly menacing Mr Grey to heel – well almost. Anastasia has discovered she too likes to 'play'. And play they do. I'll never stand in an elevator again without wondering what the couple behind me might be up to – in the event my senses will all be on alert, rest assured.

But I think the success of *Fifty Shades* is probably that it has made female sexuality acceptable, almost after-dinner conversation (probably best left until after as before might divert your appetite). The fact that so many women are buying it from all age groups around the world (100,000 of the first instalment in the first week alone) means it was always there waiting to be recognised, but no one had the courage to write about it until E.L.James did. And she knew how to write for women with descriptions of emotion, desire and longing looks building up.

Critics say the books are badly written, but I've seen worse in newspapers and I've read novels that were grammatically worse. What it really needed was a good edit to take out some of the repetitions and put in the missing words. At one point I was thinking, "Alright already – we get the picture – he's got very long fingers". All in all I enjoyed getting to know the couple – oh, come

on, I hear you say – you just like reading smut. I did enjoy the books so maybe I do. So what? I appear to have plenty of company.

Fifty Shades may also single-handedly pull us out of recession with M&S, Ann Summers and others reporting that naughty lingerie is flying off the shelves. The author herself has received letters of thanks from women who claim the books saved their failing relationships and one guy even wrote complaining (huh?) that they had turned his wife into an animal. A baby boom is also expected with many women reporting they are having *Fifty Shades* babies. It's certainly all more life affirming than the book on the Biafran war I was reading before *Fifty* came into my possession. I'm ashamed to say I've now abandoned the war one.

I don't know what Rev David Mclveen and co have their knickers in a twist about. On *Radio U105* he and Frank Mitchell declared the books to be demeaning to women – without either of them having read them. Look, the books fulfil Bible requirements – monogamy (although the marriages in the Bible weren't necessarily monogamous so we're one up on the Bible already), going forth and multiplying – the *Fifty Shades* babies a testament to that – and not a gay relationship in sight.

I don't see how *Fifty Shades* demeans women or confuses men about what they want. All you have to do is stick to the

principle of consent – as in most things in life communication is the key. And, boy, do Ana and Christian communicate ... hmm, sorry.

E.L.James also has women pleading her for the books from Christian Grey's point of view, and she has actually included a chapter at the end of the last book retelling through his eyes and thoughts how the couple meet. Which makes you want to go back and read the first one all over again. Very clever. I wish I'd thought of it.

Now thought to be worth £4 million and counting, I bet E.L.James's inner goddess is grinning all the way to the bank - in her Manolo Blahnik's, of course. And if you want to know what that refers to you'll definitely have to read *Fifty Shades* for yourself.

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