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Travelling Southwards

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Fifty Shades of Grey by [E.L. James](#)

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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.

Yet if you were a working-class boy in the 1970s, badly written books about fucking – quickly followed in the 1980s by badly written books about shopping-and-fucking – were the kinds of book your mother read, and so, to be fair, did your father, and to be even fairer, 400 million other people. When I was about ten I went to a jumble sale to buy books only to discover that everything that wasn't a copy of *Jaws* was by Jackie Collins, Harold Robbins, Sidney Sheldon, or Danielle Steel. I noted this cultural deficit in my compendium of things to complain about to God but I read *The Bitch* myself on the way home and remember a very fruity passage in which the heroine, a woman who owned a disco and was called Fontaine, has sex in a hot tub with a very unsuitable man who might or might not have been in the Mafia. I also read *Jaws* but scarcely got beyond the sex scene on the beach before I came across the gouging Great White and the word 'sinew', which I'd never encountered before. I had more trouble with *The Carpetbaggers*. I'm not saying I knew much about the world of discos or killer sharks, but Robbins's world of Hollywood high living and eternal shagging was a challenge to my imagination. The term 'blow-job' was a legendary beast that stalked the imagination of Ayrshire boys for many years. But the style of the book remained with me, too: suddenly there was 'thrusting' and 'quivering' and 'juddering' and 'pulsating'. My father gave me a funny look when Robbins's name came up during an episode of *Fawlty Towers*. 'Pornographic muzak,'

Basil says to his wife as he addresses her liking for the great man's oeuvre.

Robbins and Collins liked a plush car with a smooth chassis. They liked champagne and caviar and jets you could shag in. They liked big desks. They liked jacuzzis. But what these gazillion-selling authors liked most was a human being perpetually on the brink of a soaring orgasm. Women just had to be approached, sometimes just looked at, and a 'shuddering' event would occur in their 'sex'. Sometimes it wasn't called 'my sex', and the word 'clitoris' made its debut in our lives. Men sometimes had cocks but more usually they had a 'member' or a 'shaft' or just an 'erection'. More likely, they had a 'towering erection' or a 'colossal shaft', and that was worrying. Things didn't improve a great deal in the 1980s, when women came on TV wearing lakes of lipgloss. Jackie Collins's sister Joan was chief among them in *Dynasty*, pouting for England and surrounded by gay men with big hair who were keen to get on with the shafting. By this point in the evolution of the genre, 'shafting' could also mean something else, and the enduring aspect of 1980s sex novels was their obsession with new money. Time was when a romantic hero could be a soldier or a doctor or, heaven help us, a priest. But in the age of Jilly Cooper and Judith Krantz he had better be a polo player. Work is for pigs, and anyone without enough money to coat themselves in leisure had no place in a Krantz novel. There was something nouveau about the new bonkbusters that perfectly suited the times. A point made by Clive James in these pages in a review of *Princess Daisy*: 'Mrs Krantz would probably hate to hear it said,' he wrote, 'but she gives the impression of having been included late amongst the exclusiveness she so admires. There is nothing wrong with gusto, but when easy familiarity is what you are trying to convey, gush is to be avoided.'^[*] Each era gets the erotic writing it craves, or deserves, if that doesn't sound too much like I'm asking you to spank me into an ecstasy of submission.

The first thing to say about this decade's multi-million-selling contributor to the art of terrible writing about sex is that she will not easily be mistaken for Andrea Dworkin. It's not that *Fifty Shades of Grey* and E.L. James's other tie-me-up-tie-me-down spankbusters read as if feminism never happened: they read as if women never even got the vote.^[†] Before we get to the designer labels – and in this, like so much else, James has learned a lot from the Jackies and the Judiths, to say nothing of the Harolds – we have a female protagonist who thinks like the scullery maid in a Victorian wank mag. To say the woman in this book is submissive won't cover it. She likes to compare herself to the heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which is nice. But Tess has the whole of Victorian hypocrisy to contend with while Anastasia just has to worry – between delicious 'humiliations' – whether she's got the right music on her iPod.

The time is now and the place is Vancouver, USA. When we meet Anastasia Steele she is fussing with her hair before catching a plane for Seattle, where she's to interview a tycoon called Christian Grey for her student magazine. She's a clever student – that's made clear – and she has a clever student's weariness of experience, but it all melts like snow off a dyke when she meets the gaze of Mr Grey. Just to get it out of the way: he's not the Elephant Man. He's handsome, very handsome, devastatingly handsome, 'the most beautiful man on the planet', with unruly brown hair and the kind of chest you can only achieve if you swim a lap

every time you make a million dollars. It's true he's very rich but he's also very generous; he wants to feed the world's poor. Christian Grey was adopted, you see, and he has quite a lot of secrets, and that explains why he's sometimes arrogant, autocratic and cold. He's 27. He's single. He flies his own helicopter. He has a voice like caramel. Her legs are like Jell-O. Their fingers brush.

Ana likes to offer hostages to fortune. 'Sometimes I wonder if there's something wrong with me,' she says. 'Perhaps I've spent too long in the company of my literary romantic heroes.' She follows Emma Bovary in nothing very much, except in her habit of blaming her crazy love life on her reading matter. If she's looking for parallels, Ana might look towards American daytime soaps, where the men are coiffed and the women are grateful; the men are rich and the women want to be seen for who they really are. Ana has no time to be Young and Restless: she's too busy following the 'dangerous' Christian Grey from place to place, or feeling a 'current' going through her whenever he turns up. A current that goes all the way down to her sex. In fairness to Ana, there are several things that attract her to the multi-millionaire industrialist. Did I tell you Christian Grey has nice hair? And that he would never harm small animals or children?

Ana is one of those people who wants everything she wants. And everything she wants has to be 'hot'. She comes out of university like a heat-seeking missile fired straight into Christian Grey's house. That's after he helped her out when she got drunk on tequila by holding her hair back so she could vomit. (He's nice that way.) It's a while before something happens but then it happens fast. Within seconds his tongue 'explores' her mouth and they're off for a drive in a 'beast of a car'. Everything is now moving rapidly towards Christian's 'red room', the place where he keeps the chains and the whips. Before her heart begins pounding and the electric current travels southwards again, Ana has a nanosecond of thinking like someone who isn't in a schlock novel. 'He likes to hurt women. The thought depresses me,' she says. But not for long. She soon feels a strange and probably quite modern lurch.

He's The Dominant. She's The Submissive. But that's not the end of it, because *Fifty Shades of Grey* has in store a further 300-page gala of repetitive sex, most of it – give or take a few smacks on the arse – completely conventional. I suspect the book has taken the world's mums by storm because there's no mess on the carpet and there are hot showers afterwards. Everybody is comfortable and everybody is clean: they travel first-class, the rich give presents, the man uses condoms, and everything dark is resolved in a miasma of cuddles. In some quarters the publishing phenomenon of the year has been called 'filthy'. But that must be a joke. It is a litany of swelling breasts and spent individuals, none of whom would be terrifically out of place at the more modest end of Mills & Boon. The expensive silk tie on the cover tells you everything about the acquisitive vibe behind the whole thing, the appeal for mothers who wouldn't mind a slightly naughty son-in-law if he also had tousled hair, an Audi R8 Spyder, several apartments and a general handiness with the black Amex. Anastasia, in a few hours, goes from being a virgin with a liking for the Brontës to being a woman who sucks her rapey boyfriend off in the bath while calling him 'sir'. She ditches the integrity almost as

fast as she learns the new rules. 'My inner goddess is doing the merengue with some salsa moves,' she offers.

In the absence of good comedy there is always the appeal of bad seriousness. Laughter arrives early here and it never stops coming – 'in waves', as the author might say. A great deal of fun can be had by noting the many comforts offered for a life of mild depravity: people in these novels don't wear underpants they wear Calvin Kleins; they don't wear sneakers they wear Converse; they don't drink wine they have Pinot Grigio; nobody wears sunglasses they wear Ray-Bans; the girl doesn't listen to music she listens to Snow Patrol. It's not that having these things is at all unusual, but the specificity implies a desire much larger here than any desire people might have for kinky sex. They are buying the books because the books invite them to be submissive too, not to punishment, but to a 1980s-style dominance of money and power and products. (The word 'flog' has more than one meaning.) Soft porn marries money very easily, a wish for diamonds especially. The conjunction would not have shocked Anita Loos, who liked a breathless girl, though the ceaseless gasping might have brought her up short:

I close my eyes, feeling the build up – that delicious, slow, step-climbing build. Pushing me higher, higher to the castle in the air. Oh yes ... his stroke increases fractionally. I moan loudly. I am all sensation ... all him, enjoying every thrust, every push that fills me. And he picks up the pace, thrusting faster ... harder ... and my whole body is moving to his rhythm, and I can feel my legs stiffening, and my insides quivering and quickening.

'Come on, baby, give it up for me,' he cajoles through gritted teeth, and the fervent need in his voice – the strain – sends me over the edge.

I cry out a wordless, passionate plea as I touch the sun and burn, falling around him, falling down, back to a breathless, bright summit on Earth. He slams into me and stops abruptly as he reaches his climax, pulling at my wrists and sinking gracefully and wordlessly onto me.

Fifty Shades of Grey deploys every bonkbuster cliché in existence – powerful men, private planes and multiple orgasms. But the trilogy also responds to a new measure of doubt in the recession culture of today: Anastasia, towards the end of the first volume, becomes uneasy about the money thing. Before splitting up with Chris – don't worry, they'll be back on the thwacking sled, and more vigorously, in *Fifty Shades Darker* – she gives him back the laptop, the car and the BlackBerry. There's a crunch to the gravel beneath her feet as she walks away: I'm not a whore, she thinks. If you want to buy me you'll have to up your game and tell me who you really are. I deserve love. The real deal. Then we can go to the Red Room and then we can spend your money.

[*] *LRB*, 5 June 1980.

[†] The other volumes in the 'Fifty Shades Trilogy' are *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades*

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Travelling Southwards. Andrew O'Hagan. 2196 words. Before her heart begins pounding and the electric current travels southwards again, Ana has a nanosecond of thinking like someone who isn't in a schlock novel. "He likes to hurt women. The thought depresses me," she says. Southwards: towards the south | ... , nautical (southward) or southward. Collins English Dictionary. Copyright HarperCollins Publishers.