BOOK REVIEW

Fifty shades of grey by E L James

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Fifty Shades of Grey is the first book of a trilogy written by E L James. The first and second books were released in 2011, while the third in 2012. This series quickly became one of the most spoken about books amongst woman, and men, in South Africa. The trilogy, Fifty Shades of Grey, Fifty Shades Darker, and Fifty Shades Freed is set in the erotic fiction genre with an overwhelming theme of sexual experimentation and the world of bondage, dominance, submission and masochism. Radio presenters, magazines and women were taken by the apparently ‘controversial’ book with many conversations amongst people being had about not only the novel, but the apparent
affect it had on women and their libidos and/or willingness to experiment sexually.

Initially hesitant to read the trilogy, curiosity got the better of us and we opened up *Fifty shades of grey*. What we thought would be a riveting story that would keep us glued to the pages for hours turned out to be somewhat of a negotiation with ourselves. Not wanting to put a book down until it has been completed, there were times that sitting in a dentist’s chair may have been more entertaining than reading about the flick flacks of Anastasia Steele’s subconscious. Or perhaps the twirls and pirouettes that her subconscious does on an ice rink, or hockey field.

The story is set mainly in Seattle – and follows the relationship between Anastasia Steele, a 22 year old literature student, who meets the successful 27 year old entrepreneur Christian Grey in a very clumsy and dramatic way – she literally fell into his office as she walked in. Anastasia Steele is a young, naïve yet driven student who interviews Christian Grey as a favour to her friend Katherine Kavanagh. This introduction was the start of a kaleidoscope of experiences that led to a raunchy and intense relationship between Anastasia and Christian. He is the unattainable bachelor that caught the eye of many women, and to their frustration he was only intrigued and attracted to Anastasia Steele. Throughout the book it is clear that Christian is a control freak who likes to be in charge, both inside and outside of the bedroom – or play room rather. He dominates and controls most of the characters that feature in his life, until he meets Anastasia who turns his world upside down.

Their relationship is strongly coloured by sex; sex of all kinds and flavours. She attempts to incorporate his lifestyle; views pertaining to sex and sexual expression into her life-world, albeit that at times she finds it difficult to do. Christian on the other hand, attempts to alter his need for control and attempts to accept and commit to Anastasia’s idea of love and what an intimate relationship should be like. In the novel it is clear that Christian is a possessive, jealous and insecure man, although for any reader of the Fifty Shades series he holds a magnetic attraction. Listening to comments from those who have read the book, Christian Grey is the epitome of what every woman fantasises about. Others hold the view that he is not the ultimate fantasy. Surely Fifty Shades is not the first of its kind and there are many more hard core books that have been written about sex and the more alternative forms of sexual expression and lifestyles, not to mention the large volume of movies such as *The Secretary*, *Basic Instinct*, *9½ weeks* and *Body of Evidence* which all depict sex in various forms. So what is it about Fifty Shades that has caused such a stir amongst South Africans?

Reviews from other readers with whom we have engaged in conversations have been mixed. Some noted a love story underneath the sex scenes while others viewed Fifty Shades as a literary work that allows readers to delve into their own fantasies in the safety of its pages. Another hypothesis is that the series of books in the trilogy allows women to break through the boundaries of the conservative sex culture that we as South Africans seem to follow. Some feel that the book is dull and rather
predictable and they were disappointed by the weak story line. Curiously enough, however, most couldn’t put the books down and were highly absorbed into them, glass of wine in hand and giggling at the things one could do with floggers, butt plugs and hand-cuffs. Certainly some of the content in the trilogy is highly stimulating and arousing.

Having read the book, we found the author’s style of writing challenging, with numerous repetitive metaphors and themes. The use of metaphors and often cheesy metaphorical descriptions became redundant and monotonous. There were moments where it appeared that the story line was about to get exciting, but the excitement of a different plot interwoven with the story line of sex and sexual expression was lost time and again. Knowing fully that the trilogy is a work of fiction, we question whether women in general really identify with the form of sexual expression as depicted in the books, or does the content of the Fifty Shades series remains in the realm of fantasy where multiple orgasms and ideal love and sexual expression are possible?

Perhaps the value of the Fifty Shades series does not lie in our personal opinions about it, but rather in the societal buzz that it created amongst the South African population when it was released locally. The book created a space for conversations to be had about a topic that is still perceived by many to be improper and not to be spoken about outside of the bedroom. Two years shy of a 20-year post-apartheid democracy, boundaries are being revisited, re-evaluated, and finally men and women alike find themselves able to more fully explore their sexual identities and sexual needs. Books such as the Fifty Shades series assist in these endeavours and it is high time that we talk more freely about sex and sexual expression in South Africa.

“Laters, baby…”

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Nicola Themistocleous is a registered clinical psychologist and lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Unisa where she is involved in Psychological Assessment and Psychopathology, as well as supervising Clinical Master’s students at the Unisa Psychotherapy Clinic. Nikki also runs a private practice at Bellavida Centre in Bryanston where she works with children, adults and families.

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