

# How Do We Respond to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* Phenomenon?

Shannon Ethridge, M.A.,  
Author of *The Fantasy Fallacy:*  
*Exposing the Deeper Meaning Behind Sexual Thoughts*

The office water cooler... the hair stylist's chair... the grocery store line... the soccer stands... it seems as though everywhere we go we are subjected to the buzz about the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. Not since the *DaVinci Code* and *Harry Potter* have we seen such a literary fury. More than 30 million copies were sold within a matter of months—unheard of in the publishing industry!

With this frenzy come mixed emotions on the part of both readers and nonreaders. Many will choose to be entertained by the story while others insist that they don't want to “go there.”

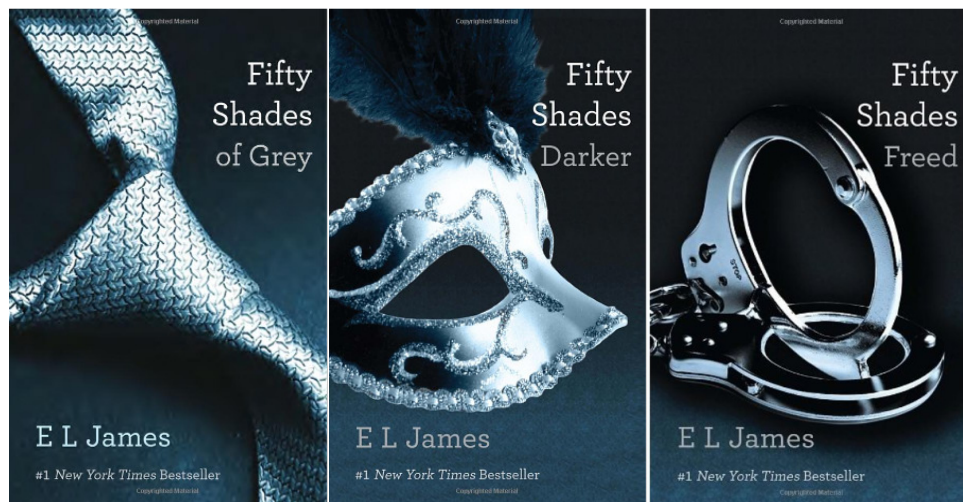
Either way, it is important that we understand what is going on in our culture and that we prepare ourselves to respond to issues with as many facts as we can gather. That is the purpose of this document—to provide a synopsis of the trilogy for those who choose not to read the books.

However, even with this synopsis it is important that you not speak with others as if you know all about these books. Unless you have actually read one or more of the books in the trilogy, commenting about something you know very little about is a sure way to make eyes roll and be labeled as “judgmental” when, in fact, you are most likely exercising caution and discernment.

For the sake of brevity, this synopsis spotlights the relational dynamics between the two lead characters, Anastasia Steele (Ana) and Christian Grey. There are many other friend and

family characters and sub-plots, but since the controversy is centered primarily on the sexual relationship of Ana and Christian, I focus exclusively in that direction.

**Disclaimer:** This document is intended to be informational. It is neither an endorsement or a suggestion to read the series, nor an attempt to slander the author or encourage any sort of ban on the books. My goal is simply to educate those who have chosen not to read the series as to *why* these books have created such controversy and equip them with a vocabulary to engage the culture.



## **Book I: *Fifty Shades of Grey***

The story is narrated by 21-year-old bookworm Ana Steele, who meets 27-year-old megarich entrepreneur Christian Grey when she has to interview him for her college newspaper. She is completely mesmerized and soon learns that the feeling is mutual when Christian begins pursuing her. However, Christian is not the typical hearts-and-flowers kind of guy. His idea of a relationship is very different from anything she has ever fantasized about.

Christian asks Ana to sign a nondisclosure agreement, which forbids her from discussing their relationship with anyone. She agrees. Then Christian presents a “Domination / Submission” contract that spells out every detail of the sexual relationship he is seeking with her. He proceeds to introduce Ana to his “Red Room of Pain,” a special chamber equipped with all manner of restraining devices and sexual torture paraphernalia. He explains that he has had fifteen women submit to this type of relationship with him in the past, and he wants Ana to be number sixteen...

I wander to the far corner of the room and pat the waist-high padded bench and run my fingers over the leather. *He likes to hurt women.* The thought depresses me.

“You’re a sadist?”

“I’m a Dominant.” His eyes are a scorching gray, intense.

“What does that mean?” I whisper.

“It means I want you to willingly surrender yourself to me, in all things.”

I frown at him as I try to assimilate this idea.

“Why would I do that?”

“To please me,” he whispers as he cocks his head to one side, and I see a ghost of a smile.

*Please him! He wants me to please him!* I think my mouth drops open. *Please Christian Grey.* And I realize, in that moment, that yes, that’s exactly what I want to do. I want him to be . . . delighted with me. It’s a revelation.<sup>i</sup>

Shocking how quickly Ana goes from being depressed about his desire to hurt women to being elated over the notion that *she* can please him simply by letting him *hurt her*. Unfortunately this is how so many women think—*No price is too high to please a man! No pain, no gain, right?* Wrong. This is nothing short of manipulation . . . mind-control . . . sexual abuse and torture.

When Ana reveals she is a virgin and needs time to think about the Domination / Submission contract, Christian is livid to learn that she is so sexually inexperienced. Bound by

the nondisclosure agreement she signed, Ana discusses this dilemma with no one as the sexual tension builds. Before even a full week has passed, Christian seduces Ana into having “vanilla sex,” involving no intentional physical pain or torture.

Now that the “first-time ice” is broken, Ana thinks she’s ready to sample the “BDSM sex” (bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism) that Christian has in mind before she decides whether or not to sign the contract. Each of these sexual scenarios is spelled out in incredibly graphic detail (enough to make the editors of *Penthouse Forum* blush), so these scenes are *not* for the faint at heart, and they are not for anyone who is offended by the “f—” word since this book uses it profusely.

An interesting side note is how Christian learned this behavior—by being seduced into a sexual relationship with a friend of his adoptive mother’s when he was only fifteen. For seven years, Elena (aka “Mrs. Robinson”) was the “Dominatrix,” and he was her submissive. Sadly, Christian doesn’t recognize the relationship as being sexually abusive even though he was a child and she was an older married woman. He saw Elena as his sexual and emotional savior who taught him how to compartmentalize his anger, fear, and anxiety long enough to connect with another human being in the only way that felt “safe” to him.

Ana is appalled by Elena’s statutory rape and, therefore, more sympathetic to Christian’s controlling tendencies, but she continues to struggle over whether this is the kind of relationship to which she really wants to commit herself. She decides to give Christian permission to show her the full extent of what she should expect in the Red Room of Pain, allowing him to spank her full force with a leather belt six excruciating times. She forgets to use the “safe word” that communicates that the pain is too much, so Christian continues, and Ana snaps. Like a wounded

animal, she turns on him and hisses that she wants *nothing* more to do with him . . . at least not until the next book begins.

## **Book II: *Fifty Shades Darker***

Ana starts a new job in Seattle and tries desperately (but fruitlessly) to forget Christian Grey. Within five days of the wretched beating, he offers to whisk her away in his personal helicopter to her friend's art show in Portland. She relents, and Christian begins reeling her back in with overtures to amend the Domination / Submission contract in whatever ways Ana desires.

In spite of his (slight) flexibility over the details of the contract, Christian Grey becomes more and more controlling of Ana's every move—governing her eating habits, her sleeping patterns, the car she drives and the clothes she wears, her relationships with others and interactions with coworkers. Ana appears to be both frustrated and flattered by Christian's controlling tendencies, and she is wooed into moving into his elaborate penthouse suite and sharing his personal bed—something that no other “submissive” has ever been invited to do. And there are many other “firsts” for Christian, mainly that he allows Ana to touch his chest and back, where many cigarette burns give clues to the incredible torture that Christian endured as a child. Readers also learn that Christian's mother was a “crack whore” who had brown hair. All fifteen of his submissive sex slaves have looked the same: waif thin, pale skin, and brown hair—just like Ana.

Christian is evidently re-creating the scenario so that he can “win” this time. Rather than being beaten (as he was by his mother's pimp without her interference), *he* does the beating. Rather than be controlled, *he* is in control. This is the only way his mind can free itself to experience sexual pleasure—to compartmentalize all of his past emotional pain.

Christian is working with Dr. Flynn, a psychiatrist who is very compassionate toward Christian's plight in life and his desires to dominate his sexual partners. Dr. Flynn seems to give Ana just enough confidence to continue investing in her relationship with Christian. In one scene, Ana swats her own palm hard with a ruler, asking herself, *why can't I take a little more pain for my man?* Sadly and disturbingly, her codependency comes across as "loving sacrifice."

[NOTE: So much of this storyline is incredibly unrealistic, most notably Ana's ability to have multiple orgasms each and every time she and Christian have sex, which is multiple times per day. (Sorry E L James, but no 21-year-old virgin masters her body that quickly, experiencing orgasms so freely and that often!) But the one element of Book II that is incredibly *realistic* is the return of Leila, one of Christian's former submissives. She has come to find out from Ana, "What do you have that I don't have? How did you land the man that I gave my mind, body, and soul to try and win?" Leila is delusional, suicidal, and homicidal, seeking to kill Ana. This seems to be a much more realistic portrayal of what being ritualistically beaten for a man's selfish sexual pleasure will eventually do to a woman's psyche—much more accurate than Ana's emotional clinginess and multiple climaxes!]

The book's fairy tale ending? Christian realizes he doesn't want Ana to be his submissive. He *needs* her to be his *wife*. He impulsively buys a huge estate overlooking Seattle (because he can, making \$100,000 per hour as an entrepreneur). In hearts-and-flowers style, Christian asks Ana to marry him and build a happily-ever-after life together. Feeling as if she has won the lottery, Ana accepts his proposal.

And thus far they have been dating for a whopping total of about six weeks.

## **Book III: *Fifty Shades Freed***

The third book opens with a vivid nightmare—a flash back from Christian’s painful childhood. At four years old, he is trying to wake up his mother, but she has been dead for several days. When her pimp discovers her lifeless body, he beats Christian, who is eventually taken into custody by a policewoman.

Shifting gears to the present, Christian and Ana are already married and on their honeymoon, only thirty days after he proposed, less than three months since they first met. And Ana has become more accustomed to his twisted ideas of eroticism. In fact, she seems to crave it at times, often teasing him in that direction.

Although the couple didn’t seem to be holding anything back in their dating relationship, they really pull out all the stops in this final book as a married couple. In Ana’s words, it’s “hedonism gone wild,” and the author attempts to weave in graphically detailed descriptions of every sexual fantasy imaginable—sex on a plane... in handcuffs... in a parked car... in a public elevator, and on and on.

In addition to all of the sexual scenarios, the main plot appears to be Christian’s growing obsession with controlling, dominating, and literally “owning” Ana. Making several attempts to teach Christian that she is not a woman to be controlled or owned, Ana puts herself in several precarious predicaments that scare the daylights out of Christian and lead to further conversations about his obsession with “possessing” his wife.

The main thing that Christian seems to want to control is Ana’s time and attention, so getting her pregnant is the last thing in the world he wants. In each of the former books, the author goes to great lengths to describe how Christian produces a condom from his pocket or bedside table every time they have sex. In the final chapters of Book III, however, guess what

happens? Yep, Ana comes up pregnant, and Christian goes absolutely ballistic! He makes her feel stupid for forgetting her birth control injections, then accuses her of getting pregnant on purpose, and then furiously declares, “We’ve known each other for all of five minutes, and now I have to share you with a baby?!? How could you do this to me?” and storms out.

Where does he run for solace? To Elena, the Mrs. Robinson character whom Ana despises. Ana is as equally furious as Christian and entertains the possibility that she may be raising this baby completely on her own. Christian may leave her . . . or *she* may leave Christian. But fairy-tale-fiction style, dramatic events drive them back into one another’s arms.

The book seems to have three different endings, as if the author couldn’t make up her mind how to wrap it all up. First, there is a flash-forward to the future, where Christian and Ana have a two-year-old boy and a baby girl on the way (yet they still have their romps in the Red Room of Pain). Next, we get another flash back to Christian’s childhood when he was transitioning into his adoptive home as a four-year old boy, causing the reader to sympathize once again with his rocky past. Finally, the book closes by flashing back to the very first scene of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this time told through Christian’s eyes rather than Ana’s, and it is clear that Christian had very dark intentions from the moment he met her, leaving the reader with mixed emotions.

Is Christian an innocent victim of sad circumstances or a power-hungry victimizer who doesn’t just fantasize about hurting women but acts out on those fantasies at women’s expense? Is Anna an independent, strong-willed, compassionate woman who looks beyond Christian’s weaknesses to his deeper needs, or is she clingy, codependent, and easily manipulated?

Only the reader gets to decide.





Now that you are more aware of the story behind the controversy, I'd like to give Christians a gentle warning for the sake of the nametag we all wear as "representatives of Christ." The worst thing we can do is judge one another for reading (or not reading) this series. It is simply not a salvation issue, and we can't make judgment calls about one another's faith in Christ based on what fiction books we have or have not read. In fact, I have heard some very admirable reasons why some have chosen to read these books, such as:

- *I was in an abusive marriage for twelve years and wanted to understand how a woman might dismiss red flags in a relationship. It has been difficult to talk with others about my reasons for reading without them initially thinking I read it to get "turned on." Nothing could be further from the truth.*
- *As a women's ministry leader, I learned that many of the gals in my group were already avidly reading, so I followed suit to be able to provide wisdom and guidance for them in their own marriage relationships. I feel that entering their world is simply part of my job as their spiritual leader.*

It's okay to be concerned about the effects "mommy porn" may have on society and marriages. It's okay to be concerned about the impression that young readers are being given about their own sexuality. It's okay to consider BDSM activities as nothing more than physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. But we simply cannot let something as trivial as a few fiction novels come between us and those we are called to love. I have heard of friendships being severed and marriages strained because of one person's choice to read and the other's choice to refrain; this is the real tragedy behind this cultural phenomenon.

To help you communicate with others in a healthy, constructive way about this series, let's compare some hurtful vs. helpful ways to dialogue about it.

## Conversation Suggestions

**If you have not read the series but are talking with someone who has, it would be counterproductive to the conversation to say things such as:**

- “I can’t believe you read that trash!”  
(If they are a fan, you have just insulted them.)
- “Why would you open your mind to pornography?”  
(The graphic scenes may have actually been a turn-off to them.)
- “How can it possibly be a *love* story? It sounds more like a *lust* story!”  
(Every reader gets to decide for herself through what lens she views a story.)

**More helpful conversation starters would be:**

- “With all of the controversy, what went into your decision to read the book(s)?”
- “What do you think are the story’s strengths and weaknesses?”
- “If you could change anything about the storyline, what would it be?”
- “How do you think this message will impact society in the long run?”
- “What kind of effect do you think the books might have on younger, more impressionable women?”
- “What kind of role models do you perceive the lead characters to be?”
- “Do you think that BDSM activities, even between consenting adults, is sexually abusive?”
- “Why do you think these books have become so popular?”

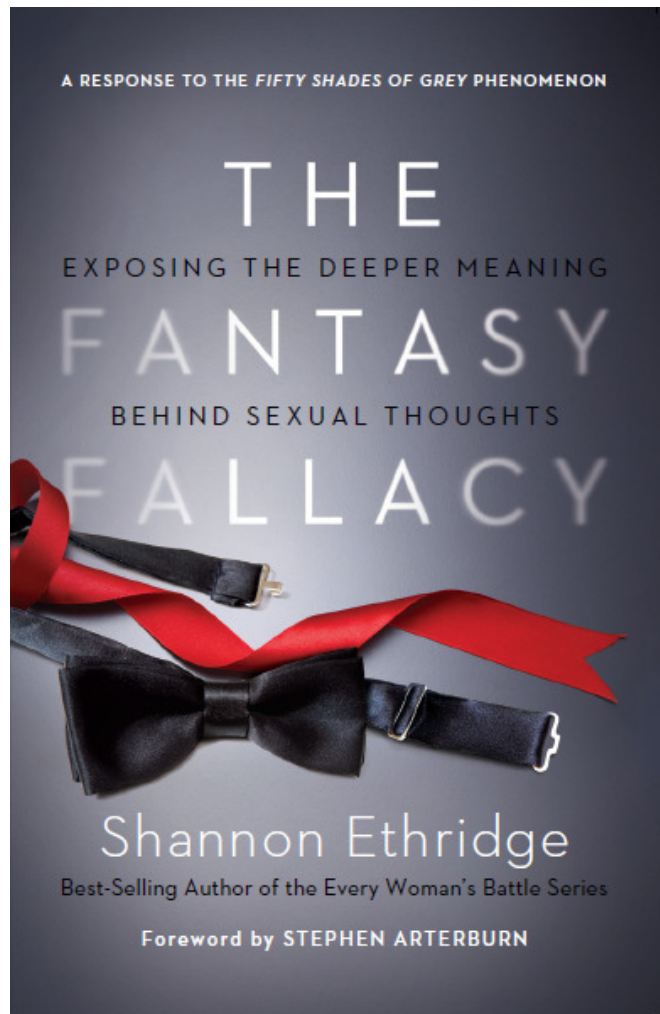
**If you have read the series, are a fan, and are talking with someone who has chosen not to pick up any of the books, for whatever reason, avoid comments such as:**

- “You *have* to read these books!”  
(No, they don’t, especially if they have a personal conviction not to.)
- “Don’t be a prude!”  
(The opinion that “reading the books wouldn’t be prudent” doesn’t make one a “prude!”)
- “If you knew how good the story is, you wouldn’t be so legalistic!”  
(Legalism often has nothing to do with a decision not to read the series.)

**More helpful conversation starters would be:**

- “How did you first hear about *Fifty Shades of Grey*?”
- “What’s played into your decision *not* to read the book(s)?”
- “What do you think of the media madness it’s created?”
- “What do you think the popularity of the series says about our culture?”
- “I respect your choice not to read them, and I’m not going to push you to change your mind. But if you have any questions about the characters or storyline based on the buzz you’ve heard, I’d be happy to answer as best as I can.”

If we respond to this cultural phenomenon with care, concern, and compassion, we may discover great opportunities to open lines of communication about healthy sexuality—both inside and outside of the church. Ultimately, that is a *good* thing—IF we are equipped with the right communication tools! This is why I wrote my latest book, *The Fantasy Fallacy*, so that both women and men could have a deeper understanding about where sexual thoughts come from, and how we can control our fantasies rather than allowing our fantasies to control us!



Releasing October 2012

Order your copy at [www.ShannonEthridge.com](http://www.ShannonEthridge.com)

---

<sup>i</sup> E L James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 100.