

Should a Catholic read popular romance novels?

by Thomas V. Berg, PhD

DEAR FATHER,

Several of my girlfriends are raving about the book 50 Shades of Grey. I'm surprised that the book has such appeal since the story line seems degrading to women. I've also heard that the writing is graphic and erotic. I admit that it is refreshing to escape into someone else's thrilling story, but I wonder if a woman of faith should be reading this book? —NOT READING

DEAR NOT READING,

Glad you're not reading it.

Fifty Shades of Grey—now a trilogy—has sold more than 65 million copies. Begun as an erotic romance novel by British author E.L. James, the trilogy follows the relationship between Anastasia Steele (a recent college graduate) and businessman sensation, Christian Grey. It has gained worldwide notoriety for its explicitly erotic scenes involving bondage, dominance, and sadomasochism.

Though not the only issue, certainly one of the most disturbing problems with *Fifty Shades* is the whole domination theme. As Dr. Julia Stronks of Whitworth University observes:

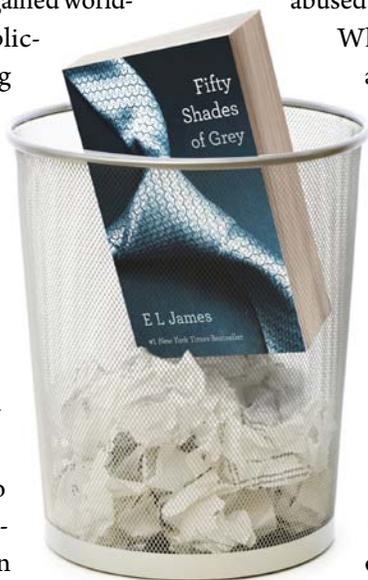
[Anastasia] agrees to [Grey's] rules of dominance in the relationship in

part because she believes she will eventually be able to reach him and heal his troubled psyche. Friends who have suffered in abusive relationships tell me that this fantasy—that with sufficient love, one can heal the abuser—is more damaging than we know. It shields abusers and keeps the abused in a bad situation.

Why, we might ask, would anyone want to contribute to popularizing such dangerous attitudes and outlooks by reading this stuff?

The principal problem, however, is that the novels constitute what moral theology calls “an occasion of sin.”

An occasion of sin is an external circumstance (person, place, situation, or thing) that can entice



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one to commit sin. In the same way that we are morally bound to avoid sin, we are also bound to avoid, where possible, that which can cause us to sin. Theologians distinguish between “proximate” and “remote” occasions. For example, alcohol could constitute a proximate occasion for the struggling alcoholic, yet only a remote occasion for a non-alcoholic, and for someone else, not an occasion at all. With many things, a lot will depend on our own circumstances, personality, maturity, and so on.

But there are things that constitute a proximate occasion of sin for just about anybody. Pornography, and all forms of obscene, titillating, lewd images and descriptions fall in this category.

While we *are not* held in every instance to avoid *remote* occasions of sin (which, in actuality, would be impossible), we *are* held to avoid what we know to be *proximate* occasions of sin if they can be avoided. We should never voluntarily place ourselves in such situations unless they are unavoidable, or there is some other morally valid reason for doing so.

Outside of an unusual circumstance (like happening to be a professor of contemporary literature in an English department that requires including *Fifty Shades* in the course syllabus), what would justify exposing oneself to the raw sexual content of these novels? A reader might object that she finds the sexual content disgusting, does not find descriptions of sadomasochism sexually arousing, and just wants to read it out of pure curiosity. She is saying, in other words, that she does not find the novels to constitute a *proximate* occasion of sin in her case.

That approach overlooks well-established empirical data indicating that *any* sexually explicit image or description leaves its impact on our brains—whether we consider it sexually stimulating or not. So just on the grounds of a wholesome concern for our psycho-sexual well-being, it’s better to avoid these things.

Does this all sound terribly prudish? Of course it does in our post-modern, sex-crazed culture. Yet, the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon invites us to examine ourselves: How much immodest and sexually explicit junk do we nonchalantly expose ourselves to on a daily basis? Does it occur to us, for example, that we can fast-forward through sexually explicit scenes in the R-rated movies we rent?

Christians, of course, are not called simply to *avoid* dirty books and movies. Rather, we avoid these things because we are called to live—*positively, joyfully, and enthusiastically*—the virtue of chastity, which protects, affirms and celebrates the God-given gift of our sexuality.

Christians have always been called to be *different*: even in the way Christian husbands and wives make love to each other. Need we be reminded that bondage, dominance, and sadomasochism have no place in Christian lovemaking between married spouses? For a primer on the aspects of genuinely Christian sexual love, Blessed John Paul II’s *Love and Responsibility* is always a good place to start. 

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