

Fifty Shades of Fantasy: The Reality of BDSM

Like most erotic romance novels, the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* is based on quite a bit of fantasy. For example, the lead male character Christian Grey, is a 27-year-old multi-billionaire who falls in love with 21-year-old virgin, Anastasia Steele; the lead female character. Is this possible? Sure, anything is possible. Is it more likely to be a complete fantasy? Absolutely. The wealthy handsome man who falls in love with the young, beautiful virgin is fairly common in most romance novels—and Disney stories, now that I think about it. However, this book wasn't your typical romance novel. This book opened up the minds of millions to the idea of romance within a sadomasochistic relationship. Not only had it hit #1 on New York Times Bestseller list, but it also was the fastest selling paperback of all time (breaking the record previous set by the Harry Potter series). While there have certainly been many, many books previously written and published in the same genre, none have become as mainstream as *Fifty Shades*. This has been a long time coming, and kudos to E L James for writing an erotic romance novel about dominance and submission, that became so widely accepted and read by so many.

That being said...I worry that individuals that have no knowledge of BDSM (an acronym that is the combination of Bondage & Discipline and Sadism & Masochism) may read this book and think that it reflects what these relationships are like, in reality. First of all, there are so many different types of relationships in the world of BDSM that I could easily write an article on that topic alone (and perhaps I will!). These relationships range from strangers playing in a club, to friends who casually play on weekends, to more exclusive dominance and submission relationships, and even absolute ownership (typically referred to as Master/slave). First and foremost, *Fifty Shades* is a love story. The reality of most BDSM relationships is not that *pretty*. While I fully admit that I only read book 1, what I did read involved very light BDSM (and perhaps that's why it was so widely accepted). Nevertheless, the book had some hits and some misses, which I'd like to help clarify, for people who don't know much about the BDSM lifestyle.

Hits

The couples that I've worked with do in fact have A LOT of communication about interests, limits, and hard limits, before engaging in activities with one another. Limits are boundaries which are set ahead of time between the Dominant and the submissive. Sometimes these are discussed verbally, and sometimes they are written down and entered into a more formal agreement or contract. At times, a Dominant may try to test the bounds of a limit, and the submissive may use a predetermined "safeword" if it's causing unacceptable discomfort. Some common examples are: yellow = slow down and red = stop; and in fact, EL James uses these exact safewords in the contract that the handsome Christian Grey gives to sweet Anastasia Steele to read and sign, before entering into a D/s (Dominant/submissive) relationship with him.

The use of a formally written Contract or Agreement is also widely used and accepted as common practice in the BDSM lifestyle. Some may contract with a partner for a chosen period of time (I believe Christian's was originally a month, but then extended it to three months in the formal contract, if my memory is correct). Open and honest communication is a common expectation, from both parties at all times. When

it comes to communication about sexual thoughts and feelings, the kinky couples I've worked with have all others beat, hands down (pun not intended!). There is so much that vanilla (non-kinky) couples could learn from them. Just imagine what it might be like, if at the beginning of every relationship, along with career goals, interests, hobbies, etc., if all couples had open and honest conversations about what they hoped and/or expected from a potential partner in the bedroom? The attention to detail in the contract in *Fifty Shades* is fairly accurate in comparison to the Contracts I've seen between couples that I've worked with, more or less. Given that the example in the book is approximately 11 pages long, people are generally surprised to hear that from me. There is a tremendous amount of time and effort that goes into the contracts or agreements. The result is very clear, open, honest communication about sexual practices.

Finally, the roles of the Dominant and submissive, as written by E L James, were fairly accurate. Multiple times in the book, Anastasia (the submissive) is reminded that she actually has the power in their relationship, as she determines the limits. She is not a victim of the Dominant's wants and desires. In the real world, the submissive partner obeys because they choose to. The submissive is therefore empowering the dominant by the decision to submit to them. This "consensual empowerment" is also called a "power exchange." Again, there are a variety of levels of power exchange in the BDSM lifestyle; E L James is simply portraying one version.

Misses

I'm not going to spend a lot of time beating up the author on the poor literary quality of the book. In my opinion, the book is poorly written. Most readers will know this within the first few pages. If you kept on reading, you just had to accept that E L James is no Agatha Christie or Sylvia Plath—and move on. I do admit that, at times, the writing was so poorly executed that it distracted me from the story. Moving on...

At the top of my list of "misses" are the character's back stories, first and foremost: our male protagonist. Christian Grey is portrayed as a man who lost his virginity at age 15 to an adult friend of his mother's; and who has a dark and troubled past, including severe physical abuse as a child, and violent mood swings as an adolescent. Sigh...in the field of mental health, we have FINALLY gotten to the place where our newest Diagnostic Manual for Mental Disorders has qualified sadism and masochism as acts including "nonconsenting persons" and/or where these sexual urges cause "clinically significant distress or impairment" in important areas of functioning (e.g.- work, school, etc.). In the past, anyone engaging in BDSM would be considered to have mental health issues. I really wish that the author had not portrayed our male protagonist with such a troubled back story, as it seems to reinforce widely accepted stereotypes that persons involved in BDSM have a mental illness and/or a history of childhood abuse. In all of the research that I've read on BDSM, the percentages of persons in the studies with a history of mental illness and/or childhood abuse mimic the same percentages we see in our general population. This research is also reinforced by what I've seen in my practice; with the couples I've worked with who are in the BDSM lifestyle. The majority had happy childhoods, and come from loving families.

The female protagonist is a naïve, 21-year-old virgin, about to graduate from college. Again, I feel this perpetuates the stereotype that individuals, who are involved in a BDSM lifestyle as submissive, are naïve, being taken advantage of, weak, etc. To the contrary, the majority of submissives that I've encountered have tended to be people in high power positions at their jobs, who like to "give up control" in the bedroom. In fact, in the past eight years as a sex therapist, I would say that I typically see couples in D/s relationships where the submissive is a CEO, a high level executive, Lawyer, Doctor, etc. In jobs that demand so much responsibility and decision-making, I'm told that it's "freeing" to give that all up for a few hours when they get home at night. Conversely, many of the Dominants that I've worked with were

Nurses, Musicians, Artists—generally people with regular, middle class jobs. Sure, there are some that fit the stereotypes portrayed in the book, but I have to say that more often than not, they do not.

Finally, I'd like to address what I like to call the story's *level* of BDSM; which I generally refer to as "BDSM light." In my early days, I once asked a couple involved in the BDSM lifestyle to bring me a "Limits List" so I could better understand what was and was not included in their personal lifestyle. My client emailed me an Excel spreadsheet that had at least 300 acts listed, with a point system for the submissive to circle from 1-5; 1 being "love it," 3 being "would try it" and 5 being a "hard limit." In *Fifty Shades*, the author mentions approximately 15 or so acts that are hard limits, and approximately 35 activities/sexual acts that are within the limits. Again, I only read the first book in the series; however, I am quite certain that the BDSM scenes that I did read never even came close to involving all 35 of those activities, let alone the 250 or so that are never even mentioned. Then again, I feel confident in surmising that that's why *Fifty Shades* hit #1 on the Bestsellers List, while other BDSM erotica has not.

Until next time, have fun and keep an open mind!

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