

Lure of the Lurid

Women exhorted to eschew widely accepted pornographic novels

BY DEANN ALFORD

It's become the fastest-selling paperback in history, accounting for a whopping 20 percent of all adult fiction sold during the year's second quarter. One British hotel has placed the book on each room's nightstand, making Gideon Bibles available for its guests only on request.

The book riding this wave of notoriety is British writer E.L. James' erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, released in the United States in April as the first installment in a trilogy. Sequels *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed* were released two weeks later.

By August, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy had sold 31 million copies and been translated into 42 languages. The tremendous response landed James a movie deal and worldwide fame, outpacing the earlier success of British author J.K. Rowling, who wrote the series of *Harry Potter* books.

Fifty Shades of Grey explicitly details a bizarre and violent sexual relationship between a

businessman and young woman.

What does the massive response to the book mean? And how should Christians respond?

"What impacts women in society impacts women of the Assemblies of God," says Kerry Clarensau, director of the AG National Women's Department, who notes that church women's directors have asked her how to respond to these books.

"Women are hearing about the book everywhere," Clarensau says. "And we want Assemblies of God women to be informed about the dangers of this type of literature."

Clarensau devoted a recent issue of her e-newsletter *For Every Woman* to the subject of popular erotic entertainment.

The unbelievable popularity of these books drives home the need for conversations in the church concerning such subjects, according to Clarensau.

"If the church doesn't speak up about sexuality and what the Bible has to say about it, women

will get the information from whoever is talking about it," Clarensau says. "Porn can be a substitution for what husbands and wives are to share. Anything that diverts our affections is damaging to intimacy, and we need to run and guard our hearts from it."

The book's target readership is married women in their 30s, prompting some observers to label it "mommy porn." But Amarillo, Texas-based marriage consultant and author Patsy Rae Dawson has seen interest in this book from unexpected places. She says older women, even into their 80s, are attracted to the book, which is full of graphic sex without intimacy.

"That's because they're starved for affection," says Dawson, author of the *Marriage: A Taste of Heaven* series of books. "They don't know how to evaluate what they're reading. *Fifty Shades* is purely physical — [about] a very sick man, and all about satisfying himself."

In contrast, God blesses

healthy, loving marital intimacy and bonding, Dawson says. She is concerned that she has heard many women claim that the immoral activities in the E.L. James books don't give them any misgivings.

Dawson says the very fact that somebody could read such one-sided, abusive, sadistic behavior toward women and not be troubled by it is in itself disturbing.

"It bothers me that Christian women don't know that this is demeaning to a woman, and it is not love," she says.

Strict focus on the physical aspects of sex, void of emotional bonding that God intended, is the opposite of values that much of society and many Christians once embraced for marriage.

"Young people now are doing anything they want physically, while bypassing the emotional part of it," Dawson says. God's design intends the emotional dimension, Dawson notes.

An additional concern for Dawson stems from her work with abused spouses. Dawson cites examples from the book that fit the Department of Justice's definition of domestic violence: "a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner."

Dawson says *Fifty Shades of Grey* has quickly accelerated a new genre of decadent books.

"Judging from the titles and the covers, Amazon.com sells tons of books about bondage and demeaning romance," Dawson says. "Every woman who ordered her books from Amazon will have these pictures and titles in her inbox. She may have innocently entered a whole new, dark world."

The *Fifty Shades* phenomenon likely will have a long shelf life as a cultural watershed. Already, decadently themed parties recre-

ate fantasy scenes from the novels.

In July, hotelier Wayne Bartholomew — over the objections of local clergy in Crosthwaite, England — announced that he had replaced the Gideon Bible in rooms with copies of the book. Earlier this year, major Hollywood studios engaged in a bidding war to secure the film rights for the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

The media have long been permeated with sex and violence, making it difficult to watch even a newscast without being bombarded

by graphic images and ungodly worldviews.

"How does that impact us?" asks Leslie A. Crabtree, professor and English department chair at North Central University (AG) in Minneapolis. As a scholar of literature, Crabtree must be familiar with what's out there. Also at issue is basic discernment: "At what point do I walk out of the theater or put down the book?"

That's why she established her own set of guidelines to guard her heart.

"What I do when I read is to pray God's protection on my heart, mind and spirit," Crabtree says. "I also pray that He ultimately uses whatever I read for His glory. God is faithful. He will do it." **e**

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Email your comments to pe@ag.org.



Author E.L. James (seated) signs copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* for female fans at a Coral Gables, Fla., bookstore in April.