

Domination system

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue



TAKING CHARGE: Eroticized violence gets mainstreamed in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, starring Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan. © 2015 UNIVERSAL PICTURES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by E. L. James, was not a good book, and the film is even worse. The story centers on an ordinary young woman, Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson), who is drawn to the mysterious and intimidating Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan). The central question is whether Anastasia will sign a contract to enter into a sadistic, controlling sexual relationship with Christian.

In an early scene in the book, Ana whispers to Christian, “Is this what our, er . . . relationship will be like . . . You ordering me around?” Christian replies, “And what’s more, you’ll want me to.”

The relationship between Christian and Anastasia is predicated on exaggerated inequality: Christian is a billionaire, Ana works in a hardware store. Christian is experienced sexually, Ana is not. He declares himself “incapable” of leaving her alone and begins to stalk her, showing up at her work, her home, and on her cross-country vacation. In one scene he breaks into her home, ties her to her bed, and rapes her.

Shades began as fan fiction, based on Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series. The relationship between Ana and Christian is a grim but true translation of the one

between Bella and Edward in *Twilight*. Both heroines and both heroes lack actual personalities; they are ciphers for stereotypical femininity and masculinity. The main defining traits of Bella and Anastasia are low self-esteem and clumsiness; Edward and Christian are blurry but beautiful males to whom these girls offer up their humanity.

Upwards of 100 million copies of the books in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy have been sold, and the film grossed \$81.7 million in its opening weekend. There's been a torrent of media response to the phenomenon, much of which could be boiled down to a simple question: What's wrong with women? Why do they appear to like this twisted, violent story so much?

One disturbing answer comes from an essay in the journal *First Things*, where Joseph Heschmeyer suggests that what's wrong with women is that they've stepped out of their place and fantasize about being put back in it. "There's a hunger that's not being satisfied . . . for men who are unabashedly masculine, who aren't afraid to take control." Heschmeyer suggests that *Shades* is "tantalizing readers with a world in which men aren't afraid to lead, and women feel safe submitting."

What I see instead is a misogynist fantasy, born of a misogynist world, giving rise to Heschmeyer's misogynist commentary. Our culture eroticizes violence at every turn: in the ad image of a man pushing a woman up against a wall as he kisses her, in the "Christian" romance novels where men take charge in ways that dehumanize women. What's different about *Shades* is that the undercurrents of violence and eroticism that exist in other stories are the whole story here.

The violent domination by men has nothing to do with a love that asks men to model themselves on Christ and "love their wives as they do their own bodies" (Eph. 5:28). The kind of leadership that dominates and controls the other can have nothing to do with the love of Christ, which requires mutuality and tender care between two people.

What is disturbing about *Shades* is the mainstreaming and explicitness of eroticized violence against women. My daughters are growing up in a world where copies of these books lie in wait, ready to be picked up at a used-book sale or on the Internet. But at the same time, they live in a world where girls need, more than ever, to know that they have worth, that they were created by a good God, and that they were made in the divine image.