

Fifty Shades Of Sexuality

Whatever your feelings on the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy of books, it's undeniable that they have opened a worldwide dialogue about sex. What shade are you?

Words by **Jacqueline Hellyer**

The incredible success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (31 million copies sold worldwide) has sent shock waves around the globe, with commentators everywhere trying to explain how this book is such a big hit. The assumption is that it must be the content, which includes sex scenes involving bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism (BDSM) – otherwise known as kinky sex.

Why, these observers wonder, do so many people want to read something that includes such taboo sex scenes? Could it be that the content is actually speaking to people about something they like? Something that, to varying degrees, titillates or arouses? Could it be that a lot of people are at least a little bit kinky?

THE SPECTRA OF SEXUALITY

In our society, we like to categorise people – especially when it comes to sex. You're either gay or straight, open-minded or frigid, perverted or normal. In my work as a sex therapist, though, I've learned that, in reality, there are spectra of sexuality, and where we fall on these spectra is likely to vary throughout our lives. For example, some of us *are* very open-minded and adventurous; others may be really quite limited. Or, looking at the range of sexual orientation, some of us are completely heterosexual or completely homosexual, but most of us fall somewhere in between. With regard to sexual orientation, at least now we can talk about it. Gone are the days when the mainstream view considered homosexuality a mental problem, an act against God, or a perverted abomination.

So perhaps our thoughts on kinkiness are where we were 40 years ago in relation to homosexuality: The experts and the general population are starting to accept that it is not perversion, it doesn't need "fixing," and it's innate in some people but



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not others. The professionals now accept that if consenting adults engage in BDSM in a safe manner, it's fine. It may not be everyone's cup of tea, but hey ... maybe you drink Earl Grey while others prefer peppermint tea. It's just a matter of taste.

Maybe the readers of the *50 Shades* trilogy are tapping into the possibility of something within themselves. Or maybe the books are giving them permission to accept and explore erotic possibilities. For a lot of people, kinky elements of sex already make up part of their sexual play. Plenty of people use blindfolds or handcuffs (even if they *are* pink fluffy ones) or engage in some hair pulling or biting while in the throes of passion. They may not have a St Andrew's Cross in the corner of the bedroom, but they might have a number of toys and props that heighten sensation and allow them to play on the often delicious border between pleasure and pain.

DIFFERENT TASTES

Sex is just like food, really. In a household, you have to negotiate eating so that you meet everyone's preferences: the frequency in which you eat, the quantity of food, the availability of food, the food's quality, the type of food, the way it's presented, where you eat, with whom you eat, what you do if you're not hungry or don't like the food, and on and on. Not to mention who plans the meals, who does the shopping, who cooks, and who cleans up afterwards.

I think this is one of the most important and strongest messages of the *50 Shades* trilogy: You have to *negotiate*

your sexual relationship with your partner. In the books, the two main characters are constantly negotiating, compromising, and pushing their boundaries to accommodate her need for intimacy and his for kinky play.

It's scary for both of them; they both freak out from time to time, but they keep working through it. For starters, they both experiment a bit and explore the possibility that they might each like the other's tastes. It's not always easy for either of them, yet coming from a place of commitment – with honesty and respect for each other's struggles – they craft a sexual relationship that is mutually desirable and satisfying.

So much of my own work with couples centres on this very topic: how to talk with each other about sex. So many couples never *do* talk about it; they just fumble along, hoping or assuming that their partner is okay with whatever they're doing. Or they stick to the same old sexual script that's safe – if a little predictable and dull. Again, it's rather like serving the same meals over and over again, without ever asking whether everyone likes them.

Accept that we all have different tastes, that that's okay, and that spectra of sexuality exist. (Having occasional fantasies about same-sex liaisons does not make you homosexual any more than tying your partner to the bed means you're on your way to setting up a dungeon in the spare room.) Sex, like food, is supposed to be enjoyable. Our bodies and psyches are designed to respond positively to sexual pleasure. If we limit our pleasurable options, then we don't reap their potential benefits. Exploring our tastes within all the spectra of sexuality opens us up to ongoing positive sexual experiences.

The *50 Shades* trilogy might be mostly trite romance, but the characters do successfully craft a positive sex life. Perhaps, then, they *do* live happily ever after ...