# On Not Reading *Fifty Shades*: Feminism and the Fantasy of Romantic Immunity

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Writing in July 2012, *Guardian* columnist Alexis Petridis (2012) quipped that it was time for him to ‘pay heed to the recently passed law that demands every newspaper columnist in Britain must write something about the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series.’ An indication of the validity of Petridis’ law can be found through a simple search of the ‘Factiva’ news database of English-language news outlets. The search reveals that in the year following publication of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy in 2012 there were 11,297 articles which mentioned the books.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a point of comparison, the figure for the two years after publication of Dan Brown’s (2003) literary blockbuster, *The Da Vinci Code*, shows just over half as many mentions, in 6,632 articles.

It is this cultural response, rather than the books themselves, that is the subject of this chapter. While this response is significant for the sheer volume of commentary produced my interest here is in the content of this commentary, specifically marked similarities that appear throughout discussions of the text. This chapter is, therefore, not intended as a general survey or cataloguing of these review articles, or a claim that there was no examples of media coverage that did not conform to this pattern. Instead, in it I attempt to think through some of the key tropes that I observed arising again and again. The analysis is based on surveying articles that appeared in large metropolitan newspapers, and current affairs and political magazines (both online and print) in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. This was in order to reduce the number of articles and to look for trends and patterns among influential news outlets.

The most immediately striking feature of these reviews is the way in which commentators describe the activity of reading, or more precisely, ‘not reading’ *Fifty Shades*. Petridis (2012), quoted above, uses the verb ‘skimmed’ to refer to his reading of the book. This word reoccurs throughout these articles, joined by synonyms such as ‘flicked,’ ‘skipped’ and even ‘stopped,’ and some who wrote commentary without reading the book at all (for example Crampton, 2012; Galanes, 2012; Groskop, 2012; Flood, 2012b). While it may be mandatory to write about *Fifty Shades*, there appears to be an equally compelling taboo against reading the books, at least for these reviewers. This lack of reading, however, does not prevent reviewers from having come to very decisive opinions on the books; which is that they are not only bad, but bad for a number of different reasons. Almost unanimously, commentators agree the books are badly written, the prose is, amongst other things, ‘execrable,’ ‘cringe worthy,’ ‘repetitive’ and ‘irritating’ (Washington Post, 2012; Butler, 2012; Nick, 2012; Dowd, 2012). One reviewer estimated that bad reviews in print and online would outnumber good by twenty to one, an estimate that I would agree with (Groskop, 2012). Perhaps more surprisingly, there is a similar level of consensus that the books are bad erotica and even worse depictions of sadomasochism. Jaded, perhaps disappointed, reviewers claim that the books are merely ‘comfort reading posing as porn’ or that, despite their reputation, most of the sex scenes are actually ‘vanilla’ and even ‘boring bog standard’ (Marrin, 2013; Roiphe, 2012; Arnold, 2012). Further, the books demonstrate the characters’, and by extension the author’s gaucheness, whether through poor taste in music and film or celebration of conspicuous consumption (Petridis, 2012; O’Hagan, 2012). Finally, and the criticism of most significance here, the books are heavily criticized for their gender politics – the depictions of the heroine, hero and their relationship are seen to be anti-feminist, stereotyped, regressive and, depending on the reviewer, borderline or actually abusive. On the basis of these articles, the only conclusion to be drawn is that the *Fifty Shades* trilogy could only appeal to someone with no literary discernment, no sexual sophistication, no cultural capital, and terrible gender politics.

Given that these criticisms are made almost entirely on the basis of a very limited reading of the books, the skipping, skimming and stopping mentioned above, the dismissal or condemnation of the books is generally carried out quite quickly. Almost without exception, these articles, even those purported to be reviews, are about the cultural phenomenon of the books and related topics, such as the etiquette of reading erotica on public transport or the importance of sexual experimentation in marriages and other long-term heterosexual relationships (O'Connor, 2012; Godson, 2012). Most broaden this focus to take the opportunity to reflect on what the popularity of the books tells us about contemporary gender relations and female sexuality. And it is precisely the popularity of the books that is the key issue here. What the reviewers are interested in most of all is what the popularity of the books tells us about the many women who have not only read the books but recommended them to others, given the early lack of marketing efforts and reliance on word-of-mouth sales. To put it another way, the depiction of all that is wrong with the books easily slides into a quest to ascertain what precisely is wrong with their readers.

This connects to the final element of this archive that is particularly noteworthy. There is a shared presumption among many, if not all, of the reviewers that these books are not only bad in and of themselves but they are bad for us. When it comes to these books, it seems, reviewers take a similar position to Theodor Adorno (2005, p.25), agreeing that reading can only make us ‘stupider and worse.’ In this way, the not-reading practiced by the reviewers becomes a mark of their cultural integrity and their determination to resist the corrupting influence of the books. It also means that the reviews function as acts of public service. The reviewers have sullied themselves by contact with these books only so that their readership don’t have to even repeat their experience of ‘skimming,’ ‘skipping’ and ‘stopping,’ with some even offering tips of better choices in erotica for ‘those who who don't want to suffer through three big, fat books of this’ (Cremen, 2012). This again leaves us with questions about those readers who actually enjoy the book, a group whom nearly all columnists presume to be separate from their own audience. These strange readers almost invariably become objects of bemusement or concern and occasionally hostility. But a common practice involves ‘worrying’ about the books’ effects, which, it seems, go beyond the threat of becoming stupider and worse. Instead columnists’ worries range from the slightly tongue-in-cheek fear that women will gain ‘unrealistic’ expectations regarding their sex life to fears that they will internalize unhealthy models of relationships, unable to distinguish between consensual sadomasochism and domestic abuse (Crampton, 2012; Flood, 2012a).

The response to *Fifty Shades* is highly gendered and reflects a long-standing cultural tendency whereby women’s interests and pastimes are labelled as less worthwhile than men’s pursuits (Modleski, 2008, p.xvii). But the sheer volume of commentary, the vociferous denunciations and the element of worry go beyond trivialization. The other fact which means that this commentary cannot be dismissed simply as patriarchal media institutions devaluing women is that the majority of the articles and reviews are written by women and a sizable proportion are located in sections of the paper specifically marketed towards female readers, such as the ‘Daily Life’ section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* websites in Australia. Further, the criticisms and worries are linked, by both male and female authors, to a set of ‘feminist’ concerns; the books are deemed harmful in large part because they are seen to be sexist. These responses bring to mind Tania Modleski’s (2008, p.4) comments regarding the responses of feminist and female critics to romance novels in the early 1980s. These responses, she states, tend to fall into three types: ‘dismissiveness; hostility- tending unfortunately to be aimed at the consumers of narratives; or, most frequently, a flippant kind of mockery.’ She argues that while such ‘discomfort’ may be justified it also manifests a defensiveness that has not been ‘felt through’:

‘Whereas the old heroines have to protect themselves against the seductions of the hero, feminist critics seem to be strenuously disassociating themselves from the seductiveness of feminine texts. And whereas the heroine of romance turns against her own better self, the part of her which feels anger at men, the critic turns against her own ‘worse’ self, the part of her which has not yet been ‘liberated’ from shameful fantasies.’

This kind of attitude towards romance ‘seems to betray a kind of self-mockery, a fear that someone will think badly of the writer for even touching on the subject, however gingerly.’

In what follows I argue that many feminist reviews of *Fifty Shades* are marked by just this kind of ‘anti-romantic fantasy’ that mirrors the fantasy dynamics of romance reading. This fantasy is marked by a slippage between the text and women who read it, with feminist commentators seeking not only to assert their immunity from the romantic fantasy but also their distance from those women who find themselves subject to it. This relationship is characterized not only by distance but by a form of ‘worrying’ based on the insistence that female readers are endangered by, and require rescue from, the text. This ‘anti-romantic’ fantasy is not only illuminating about the differing relationships women have with the romance genre but also helps to consider the location of feminism within popular culture and its relationship to women’s consumption of that culture. In what follows, I do not wish to deny that feminist responses to romances remain vexed for very good reasons. I am, however, interested in thinking about potentially more productive feminist practices of reading and engaging with romance than those that are evident here.

## Reading and Not Reading: Romantic Fantasy and Female Subjectivity

The popularity of *Fifty Shades*, with its endless repeat orgasms, limitless wealth, and all-powerful yet supremely vulnerable hero, is hard to read as anything other than almost a limit-case of romantic fantasy. To say, however, that romance fiction is fantasy is not to dismiss its cultural import or to suggest it is inherently harmful. Reactionary myths about feminine sexuality and subjectivity are not unique to romance literature or movies. What is unique about these texts is that they reverse a widespread cultural practice where women’s preoccupation with romance is taken for granted but situated in the background or the margins of the real story of men’s action. Romances are thus deeply ambivalent; by insisting on the significance of the heroine’s experience romance performs an important centering of feminine subjectivity even while it reinforces the relegation of women to the private sphere of love and sex (Radway, 1991). Fantasy, as Jacqueline Rose (1998) reminds us, is a more complex process than simple wish fulfilment. Rather, it is a precondition of social and psychological life in a society where reality is difficult, complex and marked by dissonance between our socially-constructed expectations and reality. The multiple dilemmas and uncertainties faced by Anastasia in *Fifty Shades*, her conflict between desiring and fearing Christian, the troubled relationship between sexuality and violence and consent and violation that exists between them, speaks to the experiences and fears of many heterosexual women.

Elizabeth Cowie (1997) similarly suggests that fantasies are useful as coping mechanisms that operate within society as we experience it. In fantasy, we ‘stage’ our desires in a way that allows us to imagine, look at, and at times enact elements of them without the danger of real-life consequences. The result of such a fantasy staging can be that it allows us to exclude particular scenarios as models for action after viewing or enacting them in our head. Playing out, imaginatively or through cultural consumption, fantasies can draw attention to their undesirability as much as it can draw one into them. In this way, romance allows us to imaginatively explore the fantasy of male dominance and female submission that is embedded in our culture and assist us in navigating social, romantic and sexual domains structured through this dynamic. Tanya Modleski (2008, p.35), following Roland Barthes, describes this process as ‘inoculation’: a small dose of acknowledged evil allows one to cope with intractable social problems while also protecting against generalized subversion. Romance novels like *Fifty Shades* acknowledge the dangers of heterosexuality, such as violence and the possibility that the male partner is incapable of fulfilling women’s emotional needs. This acknowledgement, coupled with their successful resolution, serves to make these dangers bearable and to allow women to develop strategies for dealing with them but what these fantasies do not do is enable us to challenge the existence of these unequal dynamics, meaning that while they are not necessarily harmful they are decidedly not emancipatory.

In contrast, the promise of emancipation, of changing the nature of heterosexual dynamics rather than simply successfully navigating them, is what is offered by feminism. However, as noted above, this emancipatory promise produces its own particular relationship to romance, the ‘anti-romantic’ fantasy introduced above. In contrast to the inoculation of the romantic fantasy, this is a fantasy of immunity, of being untouched by romantic archetypes and tropes. This is the fantasy that the emancipatory potential of feminism has already been fulfilled, at least in the individual herself and it is a fantasy that deeply marks contemporary feminist cultural criticism.

This fantasy can be seen, I suggest, in the almost ritualistic disavowal of any attraction to the text found in the feminist and feminist-inflected reviews. The fact that such a claim can only be made in the context of ‘not reading’ the book, however, suggests that this fantasy of immunity is fraught with anxiety, that reviewers do not really believe they have been so lucky as to escape completely the romantic fantasies which saturate popular culture. Further evidence of the fragility of these claims is found in the alternate means reviewers use to buttress their assertions of immunity. As noted above, reviewers, with a few exceptions do not solely object to the sexism of the books. Rather, this criticism is often tied to claims to superior levels of cultural discernment and sexual sophistication. *Fifty Shades* is criticized for being neither ‘real’ literature nor ‘real’ erotica and reviewers are at pains to make clear they are familiar with both. A surprising number of reviews compare the text to Austen, the Brontes, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and even *La Nouvelle Heloise* by Rousseau, which function as examples of the kind of romantic literature that the reviewer does take pleasure in (Kelly, 2012; Birmingham, 2012; Petri, 2012). It is worth noting that as Anastasia is a literature student, some of these authors and texts are referred to in the books, with Christian even buying Anastasia a first edition of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* as part of their courtship (James, 2012a). So, it is not that the reviewers have arbitrarily mentioned them. However, most references to these texts are undertaken in a way that derides Anastasia’s, and by extension E. L. James’ use and understanding of them, which provides a variant on the argument that I am making (Kelly, 2012). Just as these reviewers find pleasure in ‘real’ literature they also are clear that they are not opposed to the attractions of erotica per se. Here, knowledge of ‘real’ S and M practices performs the same function as knowledge of ‘real’ literature. The text not only falls short when measured against literary masterpieces it is also frequently castigated for its ‘vanilla’ sex scenes and lack of real knowledge about sadomasochism (Dowd, 2012).

Immunity to the text is thus obtained through various combinations of feminist consciousness, literary taste and sexual cosmopolitanism, problematically conflating feminist politics with middle-class distinction and the products of high culture. The inference, particularly, that the high culture texts referenced above offer a progressive or feminist model for exploring the role of romance in contemporary women’s lives is difficult to sustain. In a review for the Australian ‘Daily Life’website, for instance, Alecia Simmonds references Rousseau, Austen and the Brontes to make the claim that ‘romance has the potential to explore the relationship between power and intimacy.’ She follows this by noting that contemporary society has ‘collectively ignored’ this potential by ‘relegating romantic fiction to the trivial,’ leaving it in the hands of authors such as E. L. James (Simmonds, 2012). While *La Nouvelle Heloise* is undoubtedly an interesting cultural artefact, and a ‘better book’ than *Fifty Shades*,it is difficult to argue that it undertakes a more in-depth exploration of the relationship between power and intimacy. Indeed, for its many faults, connections between power and intimacy are central to almost all of the *Fifty Shades* plot developments, whether through Christian’s wealth, the dominant/submissive relationship it constructs or the conflict and negotiation between Christian and Anastasia around control, work, marriage and pregnancy, all significant sites of intimacy and power in contemporary women’s lives.

The ‘we’ who have ‘trivialized’ romantic fiction and ‘ignored’ its potential, is not, it transpires, a universal ‘we.’ It is a ‘we’ composed of those who, like Simmonds, are committed non-readers of the text, a ‘we’ that read ‘good’ books and a ‘we’ that includes neither the authors nor the readers of contemporary romantic fiction. As Anne Snitow (1979) argues, it is either mistaken or disingenuous to claim that our ‘society’ trivializes romance. In fact, it is the bastions of ‘high’ culture, ‘serious’ literature and social commentary, which tend to either ignore the topic or treat it with irony or contempt, as when *Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore (2012) dismisses romance as merely a ‘tired old fantasy’ that ‘keeps women in their place.’ In contrast to this dismissal, romance continues to be a primary category of the female imagination, central to many women’s lives, and a part of female consciousness that has remained largely untouched by the women’s movement. Romantic novels such as *Fifty Shades* similarly‘eschew irony; they take love straight’ (Snitow, 1979, p.160). It is precisely the refusal to relegate romance to the trivial that becomes one of the points of difference between readers of romance and feminist non-readers and critics.

The recourse in these reviews to high culture and cultural capital speaks I suggest, to the anxiety of authors writing from a feminist perspective in a postfeminist era, which is both deeply indebted to and highly suspicious of feminist politics (McRobbie, 2004). As demonstrated by responses to *Fifty Shades*, feminism is neither silenced nor powerless in contemporary culture, but it does occupy a precarious position. Feminism, like romance, is highly vulnerable to dismissal and denigration, as evidenced by a small but noteworthy group of articles in my selection which used the popularity of *Fifty Shades* to denounce feminism as anachronistic and opposed to pleasure (for example, Albrechtsen, 2012). Linking feminism to education, good taste and sophistication helps to buttress its position, particularly within papers of record that cater to a predominantly middle-class readership that has similar investments in cultural capital. The flip-side, of course, is that it risks making feminism the exclusive domain of the discerning middle-classes, ironically making the position of feminism and feminists more precarious by alienating large numbers of women and confirming accusations frequently levelled by anti-feminists.

## Asexual Mommies and Vulnerable Girls: The Readers of *Fifty Shades*

The vast majority of discussions of *Fifty Shades* were as or more concerned with the readers of the text than with the books themselves. As noted above, the assertion of immunity from the text was often inextricable from claims of cultural superiority to its readers. To claim immunity from romance involves aggressively differentiating oneself from the large numbers of women who display no such immunity. This distancing, and denigration, was repeatedly achieved through dividing readers into two categories: ‘mommies,’ shorthand for married, suburban women without paid employment, and very young women or teenage girls. These two groups were almost universally depicted as the primary readers of the text, despite the lack of any evidence that they consumed the book in larger numbers than any other categories of women.

References to the book as ‘mommy porn’ demonstrate the slippage between critiques of the book and denigration of its readers. The term gains its effect from its presumed oxymoronic character; the absurdity of linking its two elements. The connection with ‘mommies,’ routinely depicted as both asexual and unsexy, is most commonly used to demonstrate that to the extent the book is pornographic it is second-rate and has no transgressive elements. As one reviewer concludes in relation to BDSM: ‘What were once transgressive sexual practices have become standard mumsy desires’ (Simmonds, 2012). This phrase, from an avowedly feminist reviewer, could not be clearer about the connotations of the term mommy porn. The association with ‘mommies’ relegates the book, like mothers themselves, to a domain outside of eroticism. To completely dispel the specter of ‘mumsy desire,’ however, many reviews go one step further. Upon elaboration it becomes clear that ‘mommy porn,’ like ‘food porn,’ refers to the deflection of sexual desire into other areas. In the numerous reviews that ponder the appeal of *Fifty Shades* to mommies, the conclusions reached are that mommies fantasize about, amongst other things, shopping, brand name products, cuddles and, above all, cleanliness (Williams, 2012; O’Hagan, 2012). The following excerpt is typical in this respect:

‘When Anastasia walks into Christian Grey’s beautifully kitted out dungeon room it smells faintly of lemon, polished leather and wood. It’s clean, waxed, cared for and warm, hardware and full-size cross notwithstanding.’ (Krupka, 2012)

It is undoubtable that many women are overworked and find their almost universally disproportionate share of housework onerous. It is also undoubtable that wealth, luxury and freedom from housework are important components of the fantasy world created by *Fifty Shades* and the romance genre more broadly. However, to make the ‘full-size cross’ in the book merely a distraction is to attempt to erase the fact that without it no fantasy exists at all.

If the association with ‘mommies’ is used to confirm the book’s banality, it is the other category of imagined readers, girls and very young women, who give substance to the idea that the book is harmful and that its readers require rescuing. Here, reviewers draw on resonant cultural tropes of worrying about the sexual activities and the sexualization of girls and young women more broadly (Attwood, 2006). Ironically, such a move positions readers as possessing the same traits – naivety, dependence and sexual inexperience – that many reviewers find problematic in the depiction of Anastasia, the text’s heroine. Further, using the figure of the young, naïve girl as an archetypal reader works to infantilize readers more broadly, enabling reviewers to presume that the text’s readers lack the ability to read critically or outside the viewpoint of Anastasia. This is despite the fact that the text itself frequently positions the reader as knowing more than Anastasia, as in a scene where she and Christian watch a fireworks display under the strict surveillance of Christian’s bodyguard. At this point in the text, the couple are being stalked by an ex-lover of Christian’s who is known to be armed. When Christian comments that the fireworks display must have ‘taken ten years off’ the life of the bodyguard, Anastasia asks if the bodyguard is scared of fireworks. Here, in a move Radway argues is typical of the genre and the pleasure it offers its readers, we are invited, with Christian, to partake in amused tolerance of Anastasia’s innocence (James, 2012b).

Such a relationship to the text is rarely countenanced in reviews which identify readers entirely with the heroine and insist that they are likely to attempt to emulate her story. The following passage, taken from feminist author and columnist Gail Dines (2012), illustrates this tendency:

‘I meet many women who started out like our heroine, only to end up, a few years later, not in luxury homes, but running for their lives to a battered women’s shelter with a couple of equally terrified kids in tow. No happy ending here, either.’

When the fictional story of the heroine is equated with the actual future of her readers, the ending of the book becomes a cruel deceit rather than a fantasy. A similar move is made by the director of a UK women’s shelter who is quoted by *The Guardian* in an article about a protest the shelter organized against the book. She states that the book is not a romance but ‘really is about a domestic violence perpetrator, taking someone who is less powerful, inexperienced, not entirely confident about the area of life she is being led into, and then spinning her a yarn. Then he starts doing absolutely horrific sexual things to her.’ The story, she says, has a ‘subliminal message,’ which ‘is the classic narrative of domestic violence – “that you can heal this broken man, that if you just love him enough and take his shit enough, he will get better.”’ In fact, a real life Anastasia would be ‘physically traumatized and potentially dead.’ The article concludes with the director’s warning: ‘You have to walk away from the Christian Greys of this world’ (Flood, 2012a).

The analysis in these reviews relies on a set of conflations that deny Anastasia, and by extension her readers, the possibility of sexual pleasure or sexual agency. This can be seen in the description of the consensual and, largely, mutually pleasurable BDSM in the book as ‘absolutely horrific sexual things’ that are ‘done to’ Anastasia by Christian. This construction erases Anastasia’s consent and pleasure, both of which are demonstrated at length in the text. It also mirrors the text’s own tendency to construct an equivalence between consensual sexual practices that involve physical pain and, for instance, Christian’s controlling and violent response to Anastasia sunbathing topless, which is to bite and bruise her breasts to prevent her from doing so again (James, 2012c). Failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of either Anastasia’s or the reader’s pleasure in BDSM ironically obscures the ways in which the text excuses or romanticizes these instances of abusive and controlling behavior rather than highlighting why they are troubling or disturbing. Reviewers committed to the practices of ‘not reading’ are incapable of making these distinctions, instead constructing a hypothetical morality tale of the consequences of consumption of the text for an imaginary ‘typical reader.’ This attitude not only presumes that readers lack the interpretive abilities to distinguish between fiction and reality but also easily slips into hostility, blaming readers for their own projected victimization, or for contributing to others’ victimization. This can be seen when *Independent* columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2013), after making similar claims to the two articles above, asserts that the popularity of *Fifty Shades* demonstrates that the women who read it ‘have completely capitulated to the forces of darkness.’ In another review, she brings together the two common categories of imagined readers, asking rhetorically: ‘Will all the mumsy fans of the book want their daughters to learn that?’ (Alibhai-Brown, 2012).

In ‘The desire to be punished,’ Wendy Brown (2001) uses Freud’s ‘“A child is being beaten”’ to explore the often complex relationship between feminist activists and women’s suffering. Brown argues that feminists may require suffering in order to legitimate their identity and speaking position. In other words, if women are not suffering then feminists have no basis on which to make political claims or demand to be heard. On the other hand, feminist struggles work to ameliorate that suffering and most people, feminists included, would rather avoid than experience injury themselves. As a result of these competing desires, suggests Brown, feminists may locate this necessary suffering outside of oneself, in women whom one can claim to speak on behalf of, in this case the imaginary readers. This is done through rhetorical gestures which, according to Brown, work to erase and generalize specific instances of suffering, and erase boundaries between stories of victimization and violence, the reader of these stories and the one who speaks about them. We see this in the slippage between feminist readings of Anastasia and Christian’s relationship as abuse and the projection of that abuse onto the reader whose future becomes one of injury, poverty and possibly even death, and who becomes a victim of the text as much as the male violence it presages.

The displacement of suffering produces a degree of sadistic gratification, witnessed here in both the production of elaborate narratives of projected suffering and suggestions that readers have, at least in part, brought their suffering upon themselves. But the displacement, and its accompanying gratification, also produces guilt that the subject must seek to expiate. The guilt disrupts identification with the one onto whom the violence is projected, and as this identification is essential for the feminist speaking position, this disruption creates a new round of anxieties about the affirmation of identity and the legitimacy of one’s speech. In other words, the differentiation of themselves from the text’s readers leads both to gratification and guilt on the part of the reviewer, but also disrupts her attempts to speak as and on behalf of women victimized by the text and its romantic narrative.

The result of all this, writes Brown (2001, p.55) is ‘a surplus of scenes of suffering.’ Ultimately, this dynamic results in political paralysis; the subject is attached to suffering and also to the cause of its suffering, but displaces its anger elsewhere. To continue to claim the speaking position of feminist critic of popular culture, the critic requires popular culture to retain its sexism and particularly its harmful romantic mythologies. The point of hostility thus becomes the text which draws these myths out into the light rather than the myths themselves, leaving the feminist peculiarly attached to and dependent upon the romantic fantasies she disavows and condemns. This means that while she heaps scorn upon the readers of *Fifty Shades* she herself requires the perpetuation of the preconditions that create that narrative, meaning that she is singularly incapable of taking Modleski’s (2008) urging to turn her fury from the text itself to the social world that enables it. Neither can she insert her politics into the gap between the fantasy of the text and the lived reality of women’s lives because she is invested in eliding that gap. A successful feminist intervention in romance culture cannot ignore that gap and, indeed, must use it to find points of commonality with the reader of romance.

## Romance and Feminist Reading

Responses to *Fifty Shades* tell us as much about the relationship between feminism and popular culture as they do about the politics of romance fiction. Indeed, the broad consensus that feminism and romance readingare mutually exclusive suggests a strong, albeit negative, relationship between the two. This conviction was shared by those who offered their identification with feminism as reason in itself for not reading the books and those who proclaimed feminist discomfort with the books to be yet more evidence that feminists are out of touch wowsers determined to ruin everyone else’s good time (Galanes, 2012; Albrechtsen, 2012). The significance of this is that all parties in these debates appear to agree that feminism, whether as a perspective or a source of identification, plays a significant role in contemporary culture and in debates over women’s cultural practices.

For this reason, feminist readings, particularly of women’s writing and reading practices, matter. In this concluding section, I look at what responses to *Fifty Shades* tell us about feminist readings of popular culture, arguing that we need feminist reading practices that are critical, but also engaged with and sympathetic to the complexities of gender and sexuality in contemporary culture. This, I think, is different to reading ‘as a feminist,’ a practice based on enacting a particular political role or identity that too easily falls into the traps outlined in the preceding sections: those of cultural elitism, a desire for immunity from contemporary cultural norms and attitudes of dismissal, worrying and hostility towards those seen as ‘non-feminists.’

Similarly to romance, feminism is a site of intense affective attachment and identification. The identity of a ‘good feminist subject’ is, at least within certain milieus, as desirable as more conventional aspirations to be a ‘good feminine subject.’ In the case of *Fifty Shades*, the good feminist is the woman who has conquered her ‘unliberated’ desires and is immune to backwards romantic fantasies. Like its feminine counterpart, however, such an identity is always aspirational, constituted through the anti-romantic fantasy identified above. This fantasy must be enacted through the disavowal of patriarchal sexuality, popular culture texts that represent it and the women who find pleasure in these texts. At its worst this fantasy produces a vision of sexuality that is purely utopian in that it has no grounding in or connection to contemporary culture and the desires that inhabit it. Without the resources of a utopian feminist movement to draw on, such a vision can seem to be simply opposed to sexuality, resulting in the stereotype of the ‘anti-sex’ feminist. It is particularly ill-equipped to speak to the complexities and contradictions of women’s heterosexual experiences and the romantic fantasies that arise from them. It also harbors a tendency to reify divisions between good feminists and other unenlightened women, a tendency which too easily slides into a form of cultural elitism which positions feminism as a project of middle-class distinction rather than women’s emancipation.

As Jacqueline Rose (1998) argues, we need a language in which we can talk about women’s oppression and at the same time discuss the complicated elements of women’s fantasy lives. Currently, romances such as *Fifty Shades* are, for better or worse, one of the major tools we possess to do this and, for this reason, feminist engagement with the text is important. So, what might this engagement look like? According to Modleski (2008), it must be open to the pleasures that women receive and the multiple meanings that they draw from even compromised and complicated cultural texts. This does not mean, as some critics suggest, refusing to criticize texts that women enjoy. Acknowledging women’s pleasures does not restrict feminist analysis to documenting and celebrating them. Rather the place for feminism is perhaps to engage these fantasies through the gap they expose between what is and what ought to be, or at least what is and what women desire. It is this gap that potentially provides the space to begin to articulate truly utopian visions of women’s (hetero)sexuality.

A second necessary ingredient for engagement is acknowledgement of our own attachments, conflicts and ambivalences with these texts and the romantic fantasies they articulate. We also, as feminists, need to recognize that this is bound up with our relationship to the idea of feminism or being a feminist, particularly in the postfeminist era in which we live. Feminist readings of these texts, and of women’s reading practices, require reflexivity regarding the positive and negative affects of romantic fantasy. While I have not explored them here the dismay, disappointment and disgust that many women feel when reading these fantasies can also provide points of critical engagement, and for many readers, these responses may alternate with more pleasurable emotions at different points in the text. Reading with a cognizance of these responses, and with the openness to the possibility that at least some of our anger may be directed at our own attraction to fantasies that we believe to be bad and bad for us, allows for points of engagement between ‘feminists’ and readers of romance fiction.

In relation to the text itself, it is important to remember that both resistant and sympathetic reading practices can offer important critical tools, but that both require actual reading of the text. Immunity bolstered by non-reading represents a dead end, not only in terms of the text itself but for understanding its appeal and what its popularity might tell us about contemporary gender and sexual relations. We need to recognize that claims that the text is unrelentingly patriarchal are themselves ideological, based less on engagement with the text than with what it is seen to represent. As any close reader of Sade’s (2012) *Justine* or Andrea Dworkin’s (1990) *Mercy* can attest, it takes a great deal of literary skill to construct a novel that maintains a singular ideological focus on the victimization of women. E. L. James does not possess the skill, or probably the desire, to do this in a text that is over 1500 pages long. Rather than ideological singularity this is a text that is in fact marked by contradiction, ambivalence and even incoherence, and it is this that allows it to fulfil its ambivalent function as fantasy. There is, in other words, no unitary meaning to be found in the text. What this means is that detractors of the text, and also its far less numerous defenders, must ignore scenes that do not fit their over-arching interpretation. For instance, reviewers make claims such as that Anastasia ‘never has to think about the consequences of her actions’ and that ‘she grows even more passive throughout the trilogy’ (Simmonds, 2012). On the first point, in fact, many other reviewers complain that when the book is not documenting endless scenes of throbbing loins and pounding orgasms it is chronicling Anastasia’s endless internal dialogues between her ‘subconscious’ and her ‘inner goddess’ regarding the likely consequences of her actions. The third book in the trilogy also documents one of the most well-known consequences of frequent heterosexual intercourse, an unplanned pregnancy (James, 2012c). And while Anastasia does display intense passivity at times, to reduce her character to this ignores her frequent displays of agency, in leaving the relationship, maintaining her professional life over Christian’s objections and, in the concluding moments of the trilogy, rescuing Christian’s sister from an armed kidnapper while heavily pregnant (James, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c). This is not to say that Anastasia deserves emulation or admiration but rather to note that she does both think and act, and it requires an ideological refusal to read in order to claim otherwise.

Writing about the response to pornography of radical feminist writers such as Catherine Mackinnon, Wendy Brown (1995) notes that the desire to condemn male power can, inadvertently, depict it as more coherent and less vulnerable than it actually is. Rather than seeing, as MacKinnon does, the ubiquity of misogynist pornography as evidence of the strength of patriarchal power, Brown argues it makes more sense to see it as a sign of weakness. If gendered power structures were solid and stable there would be little need for their continual, almost hysterical reassertion. Similarly, in reading *Fifty Shades* purely as a text that depicts unrelenting male violence and even has the power to transfer that violence into the lives of its readers, we make a stronger case for masculine dominance and inviolability than that found in the text itself. Pointing to the ways this power is compromised and undermined in the text, as in life, refuses to grant it absolute authority and dominion although, again, such a reading does not require us to simplistically celebrate the text as transgressive or empowering. An example can be found in Christian’s emotional dependence on Anastasia. At one point, when he fears she will leave him for the second time, he literally prostrates himself before her, adopting a position of extreme submission (James, 2012b). Reading this dependence as purely empowering is to engage a fantasy that ignores the emotional labor that is demanded of women to foster that dependence in men and the ways in which that labor is generally neither valued nor returned. Refusing to acknowledge the dependence, however, is a refusal to acknowledge that Anastasia has power at all in the relationship, or to recognize the ways in which women may establish and exercise power in their intimate relationships more broadly. Finally, this is a fantasy where the happy ending produces the relationship that Anastasia, not Christian, has desired from the outset (James, 2012c). Their happiness is produced through adopting her vision of the world, not his, and again, this is a point that requires acknowledgement.

The responses to *Fifty Shades* demonstrate that we still need feminist readings of romance, and of women’s attachments to it, that can analyze both the perils and the pleasures of women’s entertainment. The restricted terms of debate around the trilogy suggest that such a perspective is lacking, at least in the domain of ‘quality’ journalism and commentary. What is particularly concerning is that currently feminism, as a political perspective, appears to be foreclosing rather than opening up possibilities for discussions, and particularly for discussions that could include readers and fans of the books. Rectifying this is important, not only in order to produce a more sophisticated public dialogue around gender, sexuality and popular culture that does not position women as cultural dupes in need of rescue but also to avoid feminism becoming more closely tied to a politics of cultural elitism than of collective emancipation.

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1. Throughout I will use *Fifty Shades* to refer to the trilogy as a whole which is my main focus of concern and which, for convenience, I discuss as a single text comprised of three volumes. The three novels are *Fifty Shades of Grey, Fifty Shades Darker,*  and *Fifty Shades Freed* (James, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)