

Textual Healing

Erotic novels that made women take pride in their sexuality

By: Jane Igharo



The recent erotica phenomenon, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is playing a big part in erotic literature in the 21st century. The seductive sub and dom relationship between Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey – the main characters in the novel – has caused erotica to be part of popular culture.

Long before the media started to celebrate erotica or women began to openly read them without shame on the subway, erotica was a seductive tale that was only told by men for men. Close to the middle of the 20th century, this changed. There was a sexual awakening and open curiosity amongst women that provoked them to start their own sexual endeavours in literature.

Anaïs Nin, a French writer was one of the first female erotic writers. In the 1940s she wrote erotica and sold them to an anonymous male collector for a dollar a page. She went on to write explicit novels and was most famous for her erotic novel *Delta Venus*. In 1955 French author, Anne Cécile Desclos – under the pen, Pauline Réage – wrote the sadomasochistic themed novel, *Story of O*.

The boom in erotica written by women took off in the 1970s with books like *My Secret Garden* by Nancy Friday (1973) and *Nice Girls Do – and Now You Can Too* by Irene Kassorla (1980). These books motivated women to break traditional modes and embark on adventures and discover their own sexuality.

Jean Hillabold, an erotic writer and an English professor at the University of Regina, said that the sexual awaking of women through literature in the 80s, inspired her as a writer.

“In the 1980s I started reading erotica by Pat Califia,” Hillabold said. “She described activities I hadn’t even imagined! I thought that if writing like that could get published, and the author hadn’t been killed, I didn’t need to be afraid to write my own fantasies.”

Before the middle part of the 20th century, close to a hundred per cent of men wrote erotica strictly for male audiences, but today, women hold the upper hand in the literary genre.

Everyday women are entering the world of erotic literature. Erotic writer, Eden Baylee, author of *Fall to Winter* and *Spring to Summer*, was a banker before she quit to write erotica.

“I was a banker for many years, but I left it to write erotica

– I was at an age where I didn’t really give a shit – seriously,” Baylee said. “A turning point in my life was when I had cancer. So, when you reach that point in your life when you feel like you could have died, you don’t want to keep doing things you don’t want to. Now, I’m doing what makes me happy.”

A commonality among erotica written by women, is the acknowledgement of an emotional connection between lovers. Anaïs Nin always tried to incorporate emotion and sensuality into her work, but her buyers who were men, only wanted sex. In the postscript of her novel, *Delta Venus*, she writes:

“I had a feeling that Pandora’s box contained the mysteries of women’s sensuality, so different from man’s. Women, I thought, were more apt to fuse sex with emotion, with love, and to single out one man rather than be promiscuous...I finally decided to release the erotica for publication because it was the beginning efforts of a woman in a world that has been the domain of men.”

Baylee feels like emotional intimacy is just as significant as physical intimacy.

“It’s not just about sex, it’s about pure human emotion – fear, jealousy, anger and love,” Baylee said. “I always build emotions and a plot in my stories because I’m not writing pornography.”

Hillabold, said that the evolution of women through erotica has been a good one. She recalls hearing stories in the early years when female erotica writers, writing under pen names were exposed then driven out of the U.S. or seen as promiscuous by men and then stalked. But time has changed and as a woman, an erotica writer and reader, she is glad that there is no longer a strong stigma with women who like to create and enjoy books filled with sexual fantasies.

For Rosanna Ciulla, the editor of *Inmybed*, an online magazine about sex and sexuality, erotica is sensual, empowering, liberating, and fun.

“Erotica for me is fascinating and interesting – there is so much to explore and I don’t think we have explored it enough because for so long, it was all taboo,” Ciulla said. “But now that we are given the full opportunity, let’s explore and discover what we are made of. Express yourself and don’t be confined by expectations.”

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