



Erotica's allure

The Romance Writers of America conference falls under the sway of 'Fifty Shades of Grey'

STORY BY **CHRISTINE VAN DUSEN** PHOTOS BY **RAYMOND MCCREA JONES**

The conference room's tables were filling up as 70-year-old Julie Shelton settled into her seat, pulling her pink and snuggly cardigan tighter around her shoulders. Her brown pixie cut was streaked with gray, her pants polyester and pale yellow, her sneakers sensible and black. She clasped her hands under her chin and gazed admiringly at the image on the screen at the front of the room. ■ It was a black and white photo of a muscled and shirtless man, bound up with ropes.

Shelton was 15 minutes early for "BDSM 101: It Takes More Than Handcuffs," a seminar on how best to write about erotic practices like dominance and submission, and how to accurately and authentically describe everything from power dynamics to pain and bondage furniture.

This was a new addition to the list of workshops, sessions and book-signings typically on offer at the Romance Writers of America's annual conference. In its 33rd year,

the 2013 event drew 2,000 published and aspiring authors of sweet romances, bodice rippers and naughtier novels to a downtown Atlanta hotel to network and learn how to inject suspense into their stories, create historically accurate wardrobes for characters, and other tricks of the trade.

There was a respectable turnout for most of the more traditional sessions. But the BDSM-themed workshop —

co-led by Tiffany Reisz, the best-selling author of the sizzling Harlequin MIRA series "The Original Sinners" — was nearly standing room-only.

"I wasn't sure if anybody was going to come," Reisz said, giggling. Then she snapped her riding crop.

Call it the "Fifty Shades of Grey" effect.

British author E L James' 2011 explicitly erotic story of a dominating billionaire and his gangly but beautiful and newly submissive girlfriend — originally penned as "Twilight"-inspired fan fiction — has reportedly sold more than 70 million copies in more than 37 countries and has set the record for the fastest-selling paperback of all time. The two other books in the trilogy, "Fifty Shades Darker" and "Fifty Shades Freed," have spawned a similarly rabid following, and a film adaptation of the first book is in the works.

The impact has been felt throughout the romance-writing industry, drawing more attention, publishers and readers to a category of fiction that was the top performer on best-seller lists in 2012, generating more than \$1.4 bil-



Attendee Susan Andrews dances as others arrive for the keynote lunch talk at the Romance Writers of America conference in Atlanta. About 2,000 published and aspiring authors came to the event.

lion in sales, but that traditionally hasn't received a lot of literary respect.

The "Fifty Shades" series has brought erotica out from under the bedcovers and into the mainstream; fine, upstanding women are talking openly about reading these books. And the erotica authors who previously catered to a small niche of readers are getting broader audiences, more book contracts and more promotional dollars.

"The hotter romances are what are selling now," said Hillary Seidl, an unpublished author of paranormal contemporary romance books and the president of Colorado Romance Writers. "This gave women permission to be naughtier and for it to be socially acceptable."

Tonya Burrows of Buffalo, N.Y., was writing romantic suspense novels when her editor offered the 28-year-old author a contract to write spicier tales. The first, "Wilde Nights in Paradise," was published on Entangled Publishing's Brazen imprint and carries the tagline "He'll guard her body all night long."

"I wouldn't have gotten my contract without E L James," Burrows says. "Everyone appreciates that romance got a boost. It sparks a love of romance. It might be a sign of societal changes, too. I would not be surprised if in a couple of years it would be old hat to have BDSM everywhere."

To be sure, there are plenty of romance authors who are still managing to find success without getting particularly kinky. Ellyn Oaksmith is one of them. The conference attendee and Washington-based author of the HarperCollins book "Adventures with Max and Louise" prefers to go for laughs.

Readers expect Oaksmith's novel to be steamy, given that it centers on a woman who gets unwanted breast implants in a surgical mishap and was originally titled "Knockers," but it's not particularly hot.

"I'm much more interested in having characters talk during sex and smack teeth when they kiss," she said. "I don't feel pressure to put sex scenes in because I write

comedic novels. But never say never."

The "Fifty Shades" phenomenon hasn't paved the way for just kink. Publishers and readers now seem more interested in and comfortable with other controversial ideas in print, said Jay Asher, one of the few male attendees of the RWA conference who wasn't sullenly trailing a spouse.

Asher is the New York Times best-selling author of "Thirteen Reasons Why," a young adult novel that explores teen suicide.

"Books offer a safe and private way to discuss these things, and make it easy to start a conversation," Asher said. " 'Fifty Shades' opened the door and made it easier to write about any issue that's controversial. It has helped other authors talk honestly."

All this honesty has made for a glut in the marketplace, particularly for BDSM-themed erotic romances.

"This has exploded in the last couple of years," Reis said during the BDSM seminar at RWA's conference. "In 2008 and 2009, with the recession, they killed off erotica lines. Now, because of 'Fifty Shades,' a lot of us who write this get extra promotions. But the publishers acquired a list of authors very quickly, and now the market is really flooded."

Shelton, in her cozy pink sweater, is one of the lucky ones. She spent most of her adult life as a professional storyteller and puppeteer for children in Georgia before trying to write an erotic romance. For many years she worked on her book — "Loving Sarah," a blush-inducing tale of a woman in a BDSM threesome — in relative secrecy. And then "Fifty Shades" hit it big.

" 'Fifty Shades' prompted me to send my first book to Siren Publishing. They decided to publish it. I framed their email," she said, dabbing at tears with a balled-up tissue. "I love this genre. That's why I've written a sequel."

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Writer J.P. Barnaby, left, talks with panelist Alicia Condon.

Safe romance

"Erotic fiction is more than just moans, grunts and physical pleasure."

That's the opening line from Chicago-area writer and philanthropist J.P. Barnaby's biographical blurb at the back of her books for Dreamspinner Press, and it's a bit of an understatement, given how strongly she feels about the power of such novels.

Barnaby, 40, writes erotic fiction about and for gay teens and young adults, an underserved — and, often, lonely, confused and alienated — slice of the readership population.

"These kids are hiding, and they can't be who they are," she said. "There's 'Harry Potter,' there's 'Twilight,' there's 'Hunger Games.' There are no gay characters in these kinds of books. So these kids feel invisible. They think, 'Nobody sees us.'"

She has written 19 books, some of which are targeted to adults, and most can be found at Amazon.com or in gay bookstores and independent shops like Unabridged Bookstore in Chicago.

Barnaby, who writes software as her day job, isn't penning these books to conquer an oft-ignored business market. She identifies as bisexual and sees the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community as her family. And she worries about the younger members who may not know enough about safe sex and are afraid to ask for guidance.

"HIV rates are high in that age range," she said.

Indeed, a study from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Office of Adolescent Health shows that while the rate of HIV diagnoses in older populations has decreased in recent years, the rate among teens and twenty-somethings has climbed. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than half of all undiagnosed HIV infections are believed to be carried by people aged 13 to 24.

"These kids need to have access to resources," she said.

To that end, Barnaby has created a website for her Jamie Mayfield, a character from her "Little Boy Lost" series who is a survivor of an ex-gay residential institution and goes on to write his own novels. Barnaby now has a series of books written "by" him, and on his website readers can access information on safe sex and LGBT issues.

Readers send emails directly to Jamie, including this one from a 16-year-old boy in a small town in western Pennsylvania:

"I read the 'Waiting for Forever' series and it changed something in me," the letter said. "Your book has inspired me to try to be more OK with who I am, because it's me."

All of the proceeds from the Jamie Mayfield books go to Lost-n-Found Youth to help homeless gay teens, Barnaby said.

— C.V.D.