



When people say my book has helped their sex life, I think *GREAT!*

Erika James, the woman behind the erotic novels that are taking the world by storm, talks to Victoria Young about her love of *Twilight*, being un-PC and writing her way out of a midlife crisis

Erika – or EL – James is a former TV executive, wife and mother of two teenage sons living in west London. She was catapulted into the spotlight earlier this year when her trilogy about the dominant/submissive relationship between a 21-year-old college virgin and a devastatingly handsome millionaire with a mystery background went viral, leading to a book deal with Random House and a reported \$5m film deal.

I love a good love story. But it wasn't until I saw the *Twilight* film that I got inspired to actually write one. It was just a fabulous love story. I asked my husband for the *Twilight* books for Christmas and read all of them in five days. I just escaped into them and reread them again and again.

Eventually, I thought, "I can't reread them again," so I sat down and started writing. I'd tried writing before, but never successfully. Stephenie Meyer just flipped a switch in me.

Writing was another world that I fell into; it was a complete escape – I even stopped watching telly! I sat down and wrote a love story. Then I started another, which I sent to one agent, but she said no. I thought, "Okay, fair enough." But it didn't put me off – good God, no!

My continued obsession with *Twilight* led me to discover fan fiction – which is when you write stories about your favourite book or film characters.

There's a site called fanfiction.net, where you can upload chapters and people give feedback. I read a few *Twilight* fan fiction stories and thought, "I'll have a go at this." So I wrote one and then had an idea for another one, which inspired *Fifty Shades*.

I found myself thinking, "What if you met someone who wanted to dominate you, and you didn't want to do that?" What would happen?" The idea came from reading about the BDSM (Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, and Sadomasochism) lifestyle. And it just

evolved as I got to know the characters. I wrote what I wanted to write and thought, "This is what turns me on, maybe it will turn somebody else on."

I do have an inner critic – I think everyone has. But you just have to keep going. You have to think, "Right, I'm just going to do this and that's it." I said to myself, "Stop thinking about it, just do it."

In a way, writing it was my midlife crisis. You get to a certain age and you're still doing the same thing. When I started writing, I really was very unhappy in my job so I escaped into writing and it took me out of my world. My husband used to say, "You really need to get a hobby," and, finally, I found one and I really, really enjoyed it.

***Fifty Shades* is set mainly in Seattle, which I have never been to,** but that was fun – writing about a place I know nothing about, although I've travelled all of the roads in the book, but only on Google Street View. >>

everyone's talking about...

I had a vague dream that it might see the light of day, but, because it was fan fiction, everyone said, "No publisher will look at you." I just carried on writing and posting a chapter every week.

That was an extraordinarily fun way to write – writing, posting, then getting an immediate response on Twitter. I had no idea that I could really tell a tale – and that was hugely empowering. My self-confidence and my self-esteem grew.

Then a friend of mine found a publisher for his fan fiction. I thought, "If he can do it, I'll do it." I'd written two and a half books of the trilogy, which I sent to the Writer's Coffee Shop, which is an Australian website and imprint that publishes ebooks and also prints on demand. They published the first book last May, the second in September and the third in January.

By December, the books had gone viral in the States. The book sales were getting exponentially bigger and I started getting emails saying, "I've read it, all my girlfriends are reading it, everyone in my town is reading..." There was no publicity; it was all word of mouth and it spread like wildfire. It just went crazy. And because it was only available as an ebook and as a print-on-demand book, I started getting offers from major publishers.

I think I've tapped into something, but, to this day, I don't know exactly what: whether it's wish fulfilment, the fantasy, the love story, women voicing their sexual desires, the kinky sex. Or maybe it's a combination of all of those things.

Getting emails from women reading my book was amazing. But what really knocked me off my chair was getting an email asking about the film rights. Then I got another one, and another, from one of the biggest talent agencies in Hollywood. I just could not believe it.

I feel like I've walked into an alternative universe, like it's happening to somebody else. In the space of two months, I'd done a book deal with America, the UK and the Commonwealth, book deals in 35-odd countries, and now the film deal.

When people say my book has helped their sex life, I think, "Great!" That wasn't my intention at all – all I wanted

"It's almost un-PC to suggest it, but I think that women wouldn't mind a bit of domination now and again. We've come so far and when you know that you make all the decisions – well, sometimes it would just be nice for someone else to"



to do was tell a love story and hope that people would enjoy it, be entertained by it – but I'm so pleased to hear it.

I get my husband to read everything I write because he's a screenwriter and has been writing all his life. When he read my first two, he was very diplomatic. Then he read the third one, which he really quite enjoyed. He went through

it saying, "Oh, that's hot." Did he learn something about me that he didn't know before? No, I think he's probably always suspected – and that's all I'm going to say!

I wanted a discreet cover. I think that makes it safer for women to read. I used to read romantic fiction on the train to work and I'm not a fan of covers with a torso and the woman with her clothes falling off.

I haven't had time to think about what we're going to do with the money from the film deal. I've thought about extending my kitchen, but, other than that, I really don't know.

My sons sort of roll their eyes at me. They're very, very proud, but also a bit, "Woah, where's Mum gone?" But I'm still doing the laundry, still nagging them to get out of bed and go to school and nagging them to do piano practice, so that doesn't change.

They know it's a racy novel. My youngest son brought one of the books back from school from his friend's sister for me to sign, and I said to him, "You haven't read this have you?" and he said, "No, no, no!" The irony of living with two writers is that my kids don't read generally, in spite of all our encouragement. I'm sure they'll get round to it. I just hope they don't read this particular book. But my mother's read it twice – she loves it – and my 83-year-old auntie does too.

So what's the book all about?

+ Described as "mommy porn" in the US, the trilogy is an exploration of the power play between anti-hero Christian Grey, and virginal-but-feisty heroine Anastasia Steele, who seeks to uncover the dark secrets that make him a dominant. The pair have pages and pages of graphic sex, though EL James steers away from crude language.

+ Fan-fiction authors write stories about their favourite TV, film or book characters. They create their own plots, but use established ideas invented by another author. For example, on fanfiction.net, nearly 600,000 people have written stories featuring the Harry Potter characters!

Want to write? Here are EL James's tips...

+ Stop thinking about it – just do it.

+ You don't have to start at the beginning: write a scene, write a line; just write something.

+ If you have a conversation in your head between two people, get it down on paper – it will inspire you to do more.

+ If you are stuck, try music. There's a song by John Martyn called *Man In The Station*. It's my get-up-and-do-it song. *Fifty Shades Of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed* are out now in paperback and ebook (Arrow). w&h

