WORDS *by* SUSAN HORSBURGH

What women *really* want

Regency soft porn has pulses racing, dodgy S&M books are flying off the shelves and sex toy sales are booming. Does the craze for passionate pop culture hint at the real-life desires of modern women?

The

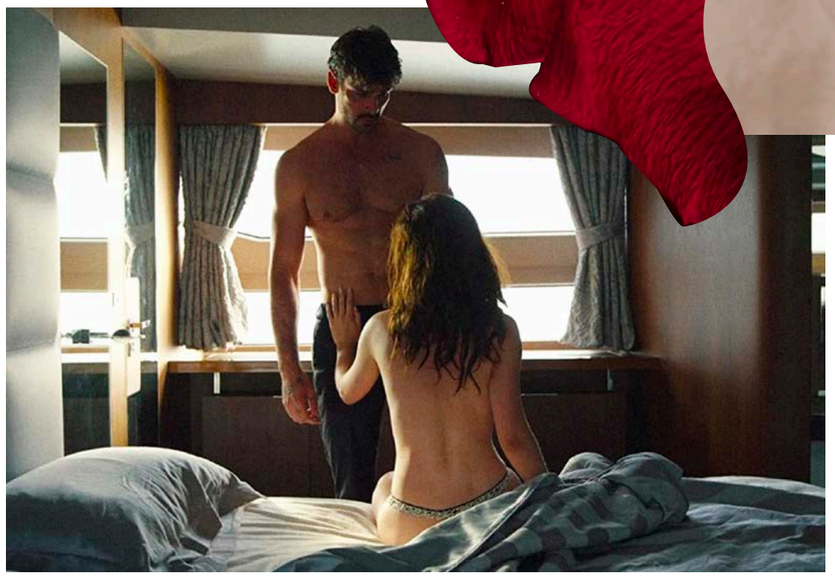
premise of the book is problematic at best: a sociopathic, albeit handsome, Sicilian crime boss, with a penchant for throat-clutching sex play, kidnaps a "feisty" hotel sales exec and gives her 365 days to fall in love with him. Inexplicably, she does – and a UTI-inducing amount of aggressive sexual congress ensues.

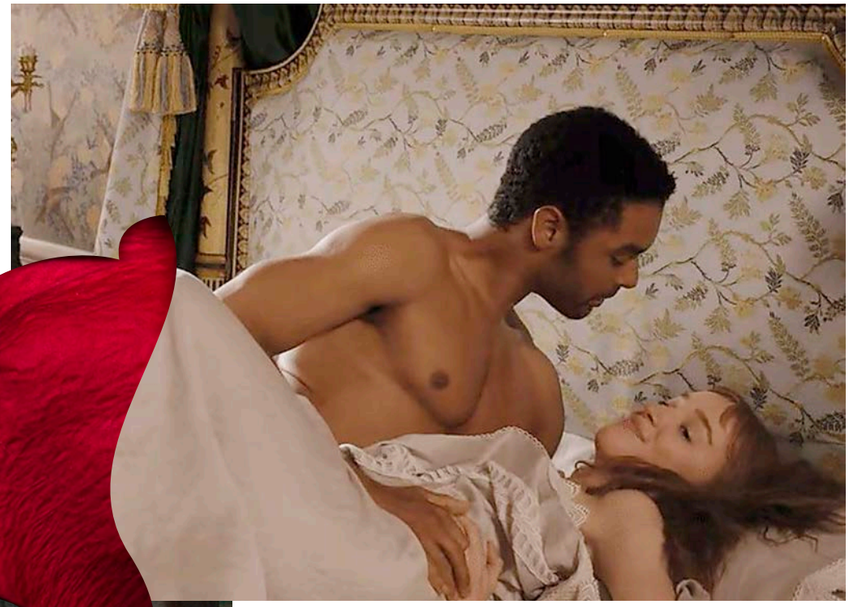
Dubbed the Polish *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *365 Days* is the first instalment in a controversial erotic trilogy by Blanka Lipińska, revolving around a swarthy alpha male called Massimo, who racks up his first sexual assault on page two. Granted, he's not your garden-variety dreamboat. Still, *365 Days* has become a global sensation. The novel has sold more than 1.5 million copies in Poland, and the English translation has just arrived in Australia, hot on the heels of the hit Netflix movie that premiered last year to howls of protest. Critics blasted the film for romanticising sexual violence, while Welsh singer Duffy – herself a survivor of abduction and rape – called on the streaming platform to ban it.

There's no doubt *365 Days* is ideologically on the nose and, with a Rotten Tomatoes rating of 0%, it's cinematically not much chop either – *Variety* has called the "dumber-than-hair" movie "a thoroughly terrible, politically objectionable, occasionally hilarious Polish humpathon" – yet there are women who are lapping it up. One Twitter user seemed to speak for millions when she posted her video reaction to the orgasmic yacht scene: "This is disgusting," she scoffed. "Give it to me now!"

At the other end of the fantasy spectrum is soapy period drama *Bridgerton*. The Regency romp is now Netflix's biggest TV series ever, thanks in no small part to its lady-centred soft porn, which runs the gamut from languorous glove removal to feverish cunnilingus on a library ladder. Mr Darcy in a wet white shirt was once enough to leave women breathless; now we have multiple shots of the Duke's taut naked buttocks. He drops lines like, "I burn for you", even workshops his lady's pleasure: "Do you like this?" he asks a rain-soaked Daphne mid-foreplay. "Tell me what you want."

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> – *Jacqueline Hellyer*





Sexologist and relationship expert Nikki Goldstein suggests that the current craze for sexed-up pop culture is proof that women's erotic desires are finally claiming centre stage. "The bigger picture is that female sexuality is now at the forefront, it's in the mainstream," she says. "We're seeing this idea of thinking about female pleasure and providing for it." The success of these saucy shows "gives us an insight into how sexualised women's minds are. There is so much in society that tells us to bury that and to conform, but this just goes to show that women do fantasise about sex."

Psychosexual and relationships therapist Jacqueline Hellyer agrees, placing the trend in a historical context. "We're only just coming out of the dark ages of female sexual suppression, and we're all a bit confused about it," says Hellyer. "We had thousands of years under the patriarchy, with female sexuality being solely used to satisfy men's sexuality. You were either the good girl or the bad girl. If you were the good girl, the purpose of your sexuality was to make offspring for your husband to continue his family line, and if you were the bad girl, the purpose of your sexuality was to provide pleasure for him."

Now, she says, women are ready to break out of this patriarchal mode of thinking and own their sexuality – from the inside. "It's not just about the sex act, it's about feeling this powerful, creative, joyful energy that is inside all of us, and letting it flow."

Moreover, says author Lucy-Anne Holmes, women are eager to talk about it. For her latest book, *Women on Top of the World: What Women Think About When They're Having Sex*, Lucy probed the erotic thoughts of 51 women from around the globe, aged 19 to 74, straight to gay, single to polyamorous. "I felt there was almost a longing," says Lucy, speaking from her UK home. "Many of them hadn't spoken [about] these things to anyone and there was almost a sense of relief talking about it."

Female sexuality, it seems, is anything but homogenous. In *Women on Top of the World*, there's a Japanese woman who sees colours and numbers when she orgasms, an Italian who fantasises about her girlfriend being pregnant, and a Scottish woman who daydreams of being a queen who picks subjects to pleasure her. One Singaporean gets turned on by audio clips of English guys saying boyfriendy things like, "Hey babe, are you home?".

Arranged in age order, the case studies loosely chronicle the life cycle of female sexuality: the insecure 20s, exhausted 30s, more empowered 40s and beyond. "I felt very tenderly toward the younger women because sex is quite complicated for them, particularly in heterosexual relationships," says Lucy. "It's not playful. She's thinking, 'Am I taking too long? Do I smell? Do I look weird?' There was so much worry about his experience." Rose, a 26-year-old American, admits she has never even thought about her own enjoyment: "Maybe I'll do that next time."

In stark contrast, many of the over-40s seem to be reclaiming their power, despite society's assumption they should be sexually shutting up shop.

"There's this prized female youth and beauty, and this sense that women therefore aren't sexual after a certain age, but I'd say that's completely thrown out the window in this book," says Lucy, citing the 58-year-old German who loves a spanking and the 56-year-old Dutch woman who has converted her garden shed into a sex temple. "It feels to me that women in their 40s really start to own their sexuality, to think about what they want, to really enjoy their sexual pleasure."



Clockwise from opposite: Last year's adaptation of *365 Days* was widely viewed on Netflix but critically lambasted; the boiling attraction between Simon and Daphne in *Bridgerton* powered a smash hit for the same platform; relationship expert Nikki Goldstein has discussed what TV drama can reveal of female sexuality.

It's also notable that men may value marathon bouts of intercourse, but Lucy's interview subjects did not. "The majority of women said penetration was probably their least favourite part of sex – they wanted five to seven minutes tops," she says. "It's like, where does this trope come from?"

Sex has historically been viewed through a male lens, but change may be finally on the way. "For millennia, sex has been on men's terms, something that was our duty to do, that could be a bit of a chore or a trauma," says Lucy. "The fact that there are so many women and girls with female genital mutilation [lets us] know that we, as a world, are still not fully on board with female sexual pleasure. But the tide is turning, and you can tell by books like mine and [Lisa Taddeo's] *Three Women* that there's a lot more sex-positive female pleasure rhetoric about."

Not a moment too soon. The clitoris is a woman's orgasmic ground zero, yet it's been an anatomical mystery for centuries. It wasn't even mapped until 1998, when Melbourne urologist Helen O'Connell documented the true extent of the sensitive organ. O'Connell has since questioned whether the much-celebrated G-spot even exists. In a hypersexualised, supposedly liberated world, there is still a significant "orgasm gap", with 66 per cent of Australian women reporting a climax during their most recent sexual encounter, versus 92 per cent of men.

In fact, a remarkable two out of three women have experienced a sexual



Right: Fans are highly invested in the time-travel love story between Highland warrior Jamie (Sam Heughan) and WWII nurse Claire (Caitriona Balfe) in *Outlander*.

problem in the past year, according to the Australian Longitudinal Study of Health and Relationships. Half the women reported a lack of interest in sex and more than a quarter reported either pain or a lack of pleasure.

"Being dysfunctional is so common that it's the new normal," notes Sarah Barmak in her book *Closer: Notes from the Orgasmic Frontier of Female Sexuality*. "What if female sexuality is not the problem – what if our idea of 'normal' is the problem?" Why should women subscribe to a male, goal-oriented concept of good sex, when it's not necessarily what they want? "Women are redefining their sexuality today, asking, 'What is sex for me?'" she says in her TED talk. "They're experimenting with practices that are less about the 'happy ending', more about feeling whole … If we define sex as part of our whole health and well-being, then empowering women and girls to fully own it is a crucial next step towards equality."

We might be living in an allegedly enlightened #MeToo era, but centuries of sexual repression have taken a toll. "For the last 5000 years or so, we have brought up our girls, under the patriarchy, to think that they shouldn't be sexual," says therapist Jacqueline. "We were still locking girls up, in Australia, in mental institutions in the 1970s for being promiscuous."

Fantasy is one form of sexual expression that has never been off-limits, and it offers an intriguing window into a woman's sexual desires. It might influence the type of erotica she seeks out, be used for masturbation or role-playing with a partner, or not be acted on at all.

> "Female sexuality is now at the forefront, it's in the mainstream."
> – *Nikki Goldstein*

Privy to more sexual fantasies than most are two Melbourne poets who launched an online literary erotica journal called *Wet Dreamz* last year under lockdown. The 25-year-old creative writing graduates, who go by the pen names circe and milhouse, have read scores of sexual fantasies from writers aged 20 to 72: short stories, poetry and non-fiction that cover everything from arthritic (and entertaining) geriatric sex to love play with vampires and gargoyles.

Erotic stories, says milhouse, are a popular form of escape for women, whose thoughts are often monopolised by kids, jobs and grocery lists. "Sex can be essential to people's identities, and women don't always get to perfect and prioritise sexual compatibility," she says. "We can't even imagine the dissatisfaction a lot of women have in their sexual relationships."

Jacqueline sees it in her counselling room every day. "So many clients come to me and say, 'We love each other, we get on fine, we have sex, but it's meh.'" Women routinely tell her they don't like sex, so she quizzes them on the sex they're having: "They describe it to me and I say, 'I wouldn't like it either.' It's like having gruel every day and saying, 'I don't like food.' Of course you don't."

With Australians having less sex than ever before (on average once or twice a week), Jacqueline's therapy sessions are booked up months in advance. Hot sex and long-term relationships don't have to be mutually exclusive, she says, but our society doesn't know what "ongoing quality sex" looks like. Jacqueline tells couples to start with their connection and the sex will follow. And while you're there, ditch the "boring, linear model of sex: penis in vagina, [compulsory] orgasms, and if you don't hit your KPIs you've failed".

The source of the problem is that people don't talk about sex. Jacqueline encourages her clients to discuss their likes and dislikes, and to share their fantasies. "That can be really fun, erotic foreplay, and once you're all turned on, you can just have normal sex," she says. "He doesn't need to know what's going on in your head, but sometimes it can be an entrée. Too many women are just thinking, 'I wish he'd do this, I wish he'd do that', and of course he's not going to."

What she doesn't recommend is porn. "There's nothing wrong with porn per se, except that on the whole it shows really bad sex," she says. "It has no subtlety. There's nothing to it except genitals. The problem is, if you don't understand what makes sex good, which is much more about feeling and connection, you can think it's all about the behaviour."

Shows like *Bridgerton* and *Outlander* are favourites because they have a storyline and a build-up – think lingering glances and entwined fingers. "You see how the erotic feelings grow," says Jacqueline. "It's meaningful sex. They are not just getting each other off."

Pre-internet, in the days of VHS pornos and plastic-wrapped servo magazines, pornography was overwhelmingly the province of men. Now, however, the male-female split is thought to be somewhere around 60-40. There is "female-positive porn" out there, but even a fleeting visit to Pornhub, which reports billions of video views a year, would suggest that pneumatic drilling is the order of the day. That might explain why lesbian porn is so popular with women, even straight ones. "It's showcasing the kind of sex that brings women the most pleasure, like prolonged oral sex, so [it offers] vicarious participation," explains University of Melbourne academic Lauren Rosewarne, who writes about gender and sexuality, "and we've all grown up in a society where we're expected to find women's bodies attractive."

Women are clearly out to expand their sexual repertoire. While the country was in lockdown last year, sex-toy sales skyrocketed as singles and couples looked for novel ways to beat the boredom and rekindle their sex lives. Online adult store Wild Secrets reported "triple-digit" sales growth throughout.

What women want in the bedroom, though, is highly individual. "Some women want intimacy and closeness, and that's the turn-on; others want the adventure and the fantasy," says Nikki. And many women are still in the process of discovering what they want – with a little trial and error.

Author Lucy-Anne Holmes would like to see more women embark on journeys of sexual self-discovery. Some years ago, the 44-year-old feminist campaigner realised that sex was the one area of her life where she gave her power away: she put up with painful penetration, apologised for her body, and had to swig white wine before sex to combat her self-consciousness.

Everything changed when she asked herself what she wanted. "Because we're so often raised to be desired and to please, to say, 'What do I want?' is radical," explains Lucy. "For women, that's a great start." **AWW**

Below: Writer Sarah Barmak talks about how women are redefining their sexuality. Bottom: Therapist Jacqueline Hellyer discusses the long legacy of patriarchy in sex.





UNSPLASH; ALAMY; INSTAGRAM.

Inner WORLD

Keen to sex-plore?

Expert or novice, here are three recommendations to broaden your horizons …

Listen ***Dying for Sex*** **(Spotify)**
When Molly Kochan was diagnosed with terminal cancer, she upended her entire life and embarked on a sexual adventure. *Dying for Sex* is that story, with Molly and friend Nikki Boyer discussing her trysts in all their hilarious and moving glory.

Watch ***The Pleasure is Ours – The goop Lab*** **(Netflix)**
This is a real eye-opener. The goop team dive into the world of female pleasure, interviewing nonagenarian sex educator and author Betty Dodson (who has since passed away) and providing the female sex education you wish you'd had as a teen.

Shop **Sex toys go mainstream! Let's face it, buying sex toys used to be a bit seedy, browsing websites with names like Good Vibrations and then having an anonymous brown box turn up at your front door. But toys and vibrators are becoming more mainstream, and you can get one simply by clicking on the link in an influencer's bio. They're trendy to discuss, and the promotion of them has removed much of the stigma.**