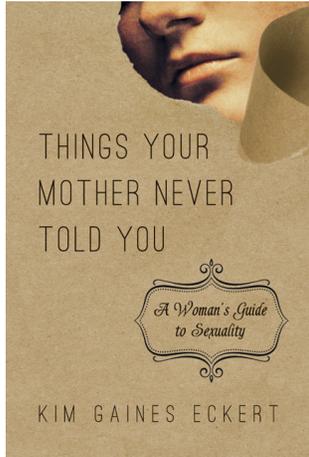




# BOOK EXCERPT



*Things Your Mother Never Told You: A Woman's Guide to Sexuality*

Available February 2014

\$15, 156 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-4309-1

"Redemptive, wise, practical, honest and tender, this book is a welcome addition to the conversation about women's sexuality."

— Sarah Bessey, author of *Jesus Feminist*

## Sex, Power and *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Sex and power often go together in our culture. Henry Kissinger's famous quote, "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac" finds support in political sex scandals (Bill Clinton, Eliot Spitzer, Anthony Weiner or John Ensign, just to name a few) and popular culture. In 2011, the female author E. L. James released *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the now infamous romance novel that eroticizes the sex-power connection.

For many people, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is synonymous with graphic sex scenes and the practice of bondage/discipline and sadism/masochism. Sometimes referred to as "mommy porn," James's book has sold over 70 million copies and is the fastest-selling paperback of all time. The book caused quite a stir, and some women were intense critics—of its hypersexuality, pornographic nature or degrading acts toward women. The Internet was flooded with blogs and Facebook posts from women who were disturbed by the book and urged people to boycott it. The vast popularity of the book, however, tells us that a large majority of women bought into *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

But long before *Fifty Shades* came out, popular culture has been telling a story of anything-goes sexuality. If we believe what we see in the movies, on TV and in romance novels, then we can do whatever we want sexually, with whomever we want, whenever we want. We can have as many partners as we want, as long as we practice safe sex. We can consume whatever sexual material we want as long as we are not hurting anyone. Nothing is off-limits. Many Christians have challenged the morality of this sexual ethic, and rightly so. But how do we respond to questions about sexual morality and behavior without reducing them to oversimplified answers? Here we will explore the relationship between sex and power, specifically as it applies to sexual experimentation within marriage and sexually addictive behaviors.

### Myth: Sex Is Power

What messages are women ingesting when they consume books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Consider the basic plotline: The main character is Ana, a beautiful twenty-one-year-old college student who is unsure of herself and seems unaware of her own beauty. She is a virgin until she meets the protagonist of the novel, Christian. He is a handsome twenty-seven-year-old billionaire who asks Ana to sign a contract agreeing to be his sexual submissive. Ana's character is a personification of the Madonna-whore archetype, while Christian is clearly a troubled soul in need of rescue. Christian feels powerful when dominating women sexually. In fact, when Ana willingly loses her virginity to Christian the scene sounds more like rape than anything else. She states that he "rips through my virginity" and then looks down at her, "his eyes bright with ecstatic triumph." For Christian, sex is about overt displays and experiences of power—winning, victory and domination. For Ana, sex is about a covert kind of power, as she learns to use her own sexual appeal to

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influence and ultimately tame Christian into what she wants.

Men who are powerful have long been using women for sex, and women have been using sex to attain power from men since the beginning of time. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not breaking any new ground here, although the explicit use of violence adds a disturbing and problematic association. Not only does the man use the woman for sex, he associates her pain with his own sexual arousal. When we connect physiological sexual arousal with violent images or experiences, we forge neural pathways that ask to be repeated. This is the foundation of sexual violence, and it is frightening and perplexing to observe how millions of women have been willing to learn this lesson. If men feel powerful by sexualizing women, then women seem to be following suit – sexualizing, objectifying, degrading and demeaning women as well.

I'll examine here the relationship between sex and power as it specifically relates to sexual experimentation in marriage, responding to the complexities involved in the stories of women like Leslie and Judy.

Leslie is a thirty-year-old, newly married woman whose husband pushed her to read *Fifty Shades of Grey* because he thought it would help her become more sexually adventurous. She and her husband dated for many years before getting married, and the longer they have been together, the more her husband has pushed for new sexual behaviors to spice things up. When they were dating, this led to greater and greater physical intimacy and ultimately to a regular sexual relationship before marriage. Now that they are married, her husband is pushing her to experiment with other sexual behaviors.

Judy grew up in an extremely conservative home where sex was never talked about. Before she got married, her mother pulled her aside and had the "sex talk" with her for the first time – at age twenty-one. Her mother described sex as something a wife did for her husband to keep him satisfied. Never did her mom mention the possibility that there could be sexual pleasure for the wife. Now Judy and her husband have been married eighteen years and have three teenage children; they have sexual intercourse once or twice a week, always at the husband's request. Judy complies, but the sex is always the same: in the dark in the missionary position.

Recently, Judy's best friend got remarried, and she has been talking openly and often about the creativity and pleasure in her sexual relationship with her new husband. These conversations have left Judy feeling embarrassed and a little angry. She is beginning to wonder if she has missed something all these years with her husband, or if there is something wrong with her or her marriage. Judy and her husband began seeing a marriage counselor, and Judy is beginning to question the rules she has always followed in her sexual relationship with her husband.

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Leslie, on the other hand, is questioning the *lack* of rules her husband seems to have for sex in their marriage. Unlike Judy, Leslie and her husband never have sex in the missionary position. Instead, he prefers for her to be faced away from him, and recently, he has been pushing her to try anal sex and domination role-plays. Leslie feels like she is always saying no and putting the brakes on their sexual relationship, and she wonders if he has any boundaries around what they can or should do in the bedroom.

*"Kim Eckert deepens the discussion about sex to a profound exploration of our sexual soul. Practical and redemptive, this book explores who you are as a woman intimately connected to a loving God, to yourself and to others. Truly a provocative, fabulous read!"*

— **Marnie C. Ferree**, LMFT,  
CSAT, author of *No Stones:  
Women Redeemed from Sexual  
Addiction*

Leslie has begun to dread when her husband approaches her sexually, because she doesn't want him to be angry or hurt if she doesn't want to do something he suggests. Leslie acknowledges that she is curious about some of the things her husband wants to do, but she is also afraid of the pain in certain acts. On a deeper level, Leslie worries about her husband's seeming inability to be sexually satisfied with "just me." Leslie doesn't want her husband to think she is prudish or uninterested in sexual intimacy, but she wants to feel safe in their sexual relationship.

Neither Judy nor Leslie feel like their sexual relationships are accurately reflecting God's loving, relational nature. In 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, Paul tells us that while we may have the right to do anything, not everything is beneficial. Instead of seeking our own rights, we need to put others first: "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others." When considering sexual experimentation within marriage, I encourage couples to shift the focus from what is merely acceptable to what brings good to the other. If my husband, for example, is going to reflect God's love in our marriage, then he will be *for me* — seeking my good in all things. Likewise, I will be *for him*. Being *for me* means that Jeff wants me to experience physical pleasure and joy in our sexual relationship, without degrading or hurting me in any way.

If you are wondering about sexual experimentation in your marriage, I would encourage you to ask whether the sexual behavior in question is for the good of the other. The answer is not only in the act itself but in the relationship and intimacy between the partners. For example, for a woman who was sexually abused by an uncle who forced her to perform oral sex, that particular sexual act may be something that she cannot do without feeling violated. Oral sex is not innately wrong, but if her husband tries to pressure her into it because of his own desire, that would be seeking his own good instead of the good of his wife.

When asking questions about sexual behavior in marriage, I encourage couples to take time to reflect on the relationship and intimacy level. What are you hoping to get more of in the marriage through the sexual behavior? Are you looking for greater intimacy as a couple, or is it only about getting a better orgasm for yourself? Pleasure is a God-created gift, but the pursuit of pleasure at the cost of your spouse may be less than loving. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is to *receive* pleasure from your spouse. Pleasure and orgasm are not wrong, but a deeper reflection on the motivation for sexual experimentation can help clarify the potential impact on the relationship. In addition, I ask couples to consider some general



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questions about the specific sexual behavior they are considering:

- Is this sexual behavior going to foster a kind of intimacy with something or someone other than your spouse (versus strengthening face-to-face intimacy with your spouse)?
- Is anyone going to be physically or emotionally hurt by this behavior?
- Will either partner be demeaned and depersonalized in any way?

Sexuality should always make us more human, not less so, and just because something is done in the context of marriage does not automatically make it holy and life-giving. The problem with sadism/ masochism is that “the movement is not toward, but away from, responsible loving and caring. The focus is upon the pain rather than the building of a relationship.” Marriage is about intimacy and the pursuit of another’s good. Sex within marriage is a good and beautiful thing created by God to reflect his love for us – and his future union with us. Our job is to enact the truth of what sex is with what we actually do in our own bodies and relationships.

Our culture tells us that sex and power go hand in hand. Power allows us to pursue and consume sex or sexual stimuli at our own discretion and for our own pleasure. Jesus offers a different lesson about power, and when we take seriously the call to model our lives after Christ, then we will see power through a different lens. Jesus did not use power to hurt, control, manipulate, coerce, degrade or harm others. Instead, he used his power to serve and love: “Jesus used his power to lift up the fallen, to forgive the guilty, to encourage maturity in the weak. Most notably, he honored those who occupied a marginal status (women and children) in the patriarchal culture of New Testament times. He was an empowerer of people.” While the movies, books and political scandals of our day may suggest that sex is power, we know a different truth: love is power. Power is being *for* another person. Living out God’s self-giving love in authentic relationship with others is power.

As James Bryan Smith writes, our choices “should be made in light of who I am, not to determine who I am.” Our sexual-behavior choices should not be about getting or maintaining power. Rather, they should be made in light of the reality that we are beloved creatures made in God’s image, designed to reflect God’s character in our lives and relationships. Ideally, our choices do not make us; we make choices because of who we are as children of God. We can use our power not to sexualize or be sexualized, but to join Christ in loving others and being for them.

– Adapted from Chapter 6, “Sex, Power and Fifty Shades of Grey”



**Dr. Kim Gaines Eckert** is a licensed psychologist in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she maintains a private counseling practice at the Relationship Therapy Center. She teaches at Lee University on an adjunct basis and is the clinical director of the Lee University Play Therapy Center. In addition to her two books with InterVarsity Press, she has also published in *Today's Christian Woman*, *Psychology for Living and Youth & Christian Education Leadership*. Dr. Eckert is a national speaker and has been featured on programs such as Moody Radio's *Prime Time America* and *Midday Connection*.

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## Ladies, Let's Talk About Sex

*In her new book, Things Your Mother Never Told You, experienced therapist and licensed psychologist Kim Gaines Eckert offers a blend of theological and psychological insights to explore who women are as fundamentally relational, sexual, gendered beings, as well as how they are called to reflect that loving relational nature in the way they live out their sexual, gendered lives.*

**In *Stronger Than You Think* (IVP 2007), you included several chapters on female sexuality and intimate relationships. Why have you written a new book on the topic?**

**Kim Gaines Eckert:** Women are barraged with contradictory and confusing messages about sexuality and womanhood. I am constantly having conversations with women in therapy, in the college classroom, and at conferences and retreats about sexuality, and I wanted to be able to provide a resource that is psychologically and theologically grounded. I wrote this book to help women understand how and why God created us as uniquely sexual female beings. Knowing who we are can then inform the way we live out our sexuality in relationship to others and in the ways we think and feel about ourselves.

**What are some of the damaging myths about sexuality that can keep women from experiencing sexual wholeness?**

**Kim:** These myths include:

- Sex is god or sex is evil
- Sex = behavior
- Sexuality is not about gender
- What our culture teaches about women and sexuality is true
- Sexuality should not be talked about
- Sex is power
- What you have done (or had done to you) is who you are
- You must experience erotic sexual satisfaction to be fulfilled
- Sexuality is about the individual

**Where might we have learned some of these myths?**

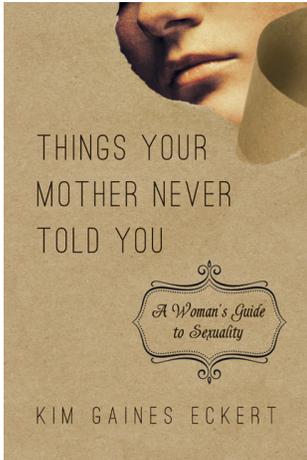
**Kim:** We learn about sexuality through direct messages (from our families, churches, friends and popular culture), but also through what is not talked about (and often cloaked in shame). By bringing those into the light, we allow God to be present with us in the questions (on things like masturbation, sexual activity outside of marriage, sexual orientation, sexual experimentation within marriage and sexual addiction).

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# Q & A



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## **What is the truth about our sexuality?**

**Kim:** We are created in the image of God, and gender and sexuality are part of that. In other words, God created us as sexual beings, and it is good! Our sexuality is that which creates longing in us for intimacy with others and with God.

Sexuality is designed to be fruitful, which means that God grows us up not for our own sake, but for the sake of others. As individuals made in God's image, we have been created *for* others to be part of restoring God's whole community to himself.