Erotic literature comprises fictional and factual stories and accounts of human sexual relationships which have the power to or are intended to arouse the reader sexually.

History
Until the invention of printing in the 15th century, the circulation of erotic literature was not regarded as a societal problem - costs of producing manuscripts meant the readership was limited to a minority of people. With the increase in accessibility through cheap reproduction though, legal strictures such as censorship were developed.¹ Not that this stopped publishers - from the Roman Satyricon to John Cleland’s Fanny Hill and Nabokov’s Lolita, erotic fiction has remained controversial. And very popular.

Women’s Erotica
In 1993, Publisher Virgin Books launched its Black Lace imprint on the market - specialising in erotica for women, by women. The Black Lace titles sold more than 4 million books worldwide, but its publisher Virgin Books – part of the publishing giant Random House – stopped the imprint in 2009 to great dismay from the public. An article in The Guardian on July 7, 2009 quoted: “The whole community is up in arms”, said a rival publisher, who added that the market for erotica had suffered a slight downturn, partly because so much material is available for free on the internet, and partly because too many titles had been published² With the rise in popularity of erotica in 2012, Ebury Publishing, a Virgin Books division, relaunched Black Lace books with three of their bestselling titles from the backlist, and plans to reprint from companion imprint Nexus - erotica for men.

E-books and Erotica
In the last decade, the rise of popularity in the Paranormal romance genre, Internet publishing and e-books led to another type of erotica becoming incredibly popular. Fantasy and paranormal genres allowed authors to explore all types of subjects for erotic novels, and website publishers such as Ellora’s Cave, Samhain Publishing and Bookstrand pushed the mainstream publishing boundaries with their titles. Buyers wanted stories embracing all types of relationships, and e-book publishers began providing more than just heterosexual romances.

¹ BookStrand has an Erotica Rating for its books to enable readers to find what they are after, and the titles range from Sweet (Mainstream Audience, no sex, suitable for young adults) to Steamy (Mainstream audience, heavy sexual tension, graphic details, still suitable for general audience), then go a fair bit further with Scorching (Erotic audience, many sexual encounters, may
contain unconventional sex) and Sextreme (Erotic Audience, extreme sex scenes, many instances of unconventional sex, no holds barred).

Gay erotica, multiple partners and more became increasingly common, and some e-book websites were so popular they began publishing their titles in hard copy as well. Writers Kate Douglas, Lora Leigh, Angela Knight and Jaid Black have all made the transition to bestselling paperback authors, thanks to their success in e-book format with Ellora’s Cave.

Newer imprints such as Kensington Aphrodisia and Carnal Desires Publishing have flourished in their niche market, and are very specific about their market audience, with the latter providing this helpful hint to aspiring writers: “We are looking for erotic novels that feature both high literary quality and supremely original story lines. Not only must vivid portrayals of sexual encounters be integral to a riveting plot featuring fascinating, well-developed characters, erotic scenes must form an essential aspect of the plot. So must romance. We are especially desirous of receiving cross-genre works: those combining erotic romance with science fiction, fantasy, paranormal, historical fiction, action/adventure, mystery/suspense, etc. We take pride in featuring the work of authors who triumphantly cross the boundaries set by the establishment press.

Fifty Shades

Journalist Peter Osnos, from The Atlantic, recounts the story of how Fifty Shades became an instant phenomenon: “A year ago, London wife and mother E.L. James started writing a series of episodes inspired by Stephenie Meyer's Twilight on fan sites. In time, James refined her principal characters and developed the racy themes of their relationship. The first volume was released as an e-book and print-on-demand paperback in May 2011 by Writers' Coffee Shop, based in Australia, with the other two books following over the next six months.

From what could hardly be a more obscure launch, the books began to gather momentum on the Internet through blogs and social media so that by January 2012, chatter among its readers reached places like suburban Connecticut, and a group called DivaMoms.com on Manhattan's Upper East Side invited James to make a visit. Anne Messitte, publisher of the Vintage division of Random House, realised the appeal Fifty Shades of Grey clearly was having on a highly desirable audience, including some women she knew. So she initiated negotiations with James and a representative that culminated with a deal in March valued somewhere near a million dollars, according to news stories at the time. The trilogy went on to sell over 25 million copies in just over four months - a feat that took Stieg Larsson’s Millenium trilogy four years to achieve.
The flow-on from what *Daily Finance* calls ‘the little smut book that could’ has reached more than the book industry. Etsy, an online marketplace for independent artisans, currently has almost 3,000 *Fifty Shades*-themed products being offered by hundreds of entrepreneurs. Fans of the books can find *Fifty Shades* wine glasses, pendants, T-shirts, pins, candles and bookmarks and just about everything else. And then there are the books - thousands of them.

**The Imitators**

Within a few weeks of *Fifty Shades* hitting the bestseller lists, numerous similarly designed covers and titles began appearing in book stores. Some were designed to cash in on the success of E.L. James, while others were established authors repackaged to appeal to the same buyers.

There were some common features of most of the books - from hotels that cater for ‘all tastes’, to men with ‘dark secrets and desires’ and young women wanting to ‘explore pleasure and passion’- fans of *Fifty Shades* had an avalanche of titles to choose from.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments was the immense popularity of the various parodies of E.L. James. For every fan, it seems there were a few people who were less than impressed with her characters and writing style, and blogs were quickly turned into print to catch that market as well. And if the men were feeling a bit left out by the ‘Mommy Porn’ revolution they had some titles they could enjoy too. *Fifty Sheds of Grey* became a popular seller, as did *Fifty Shames of Earl Grey* by the aptly named Fanny Merkin, and the L.O.L. James trilogy *Fifty Shelves, Fifty Spades* and *Fifty Shades of Grass*.

**The New Erotica**

There is speculation that the craze for erotica is quickly fading, but perhaps it is more accurate to say the craze for bondage-styled erotica is declining. In a recent article from *Publishing Perspectives*, author Kate Douglas laments that Fifty’s sales numbers make publishers think erotica readers only want BDSM-themed books. “But the story I get from the readers following my various series is completely different.” Douglas’ books are paranormal erotic romances - and that theme of love as the most powerful emotion, along with acceptance, is what keeps her readers coming back for more, she believes. Author Anne Rice believes that women’s erotica will go mainstream, and that “there will be a healthy environment in erotica for some time.”

*Shames of Earl Grey* by the aptly named Fanny Merkin, and the L.O.L. James trilogy *Fifty Shelves, Fifty Spades* and *Fifty Shades of Grass*. 
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