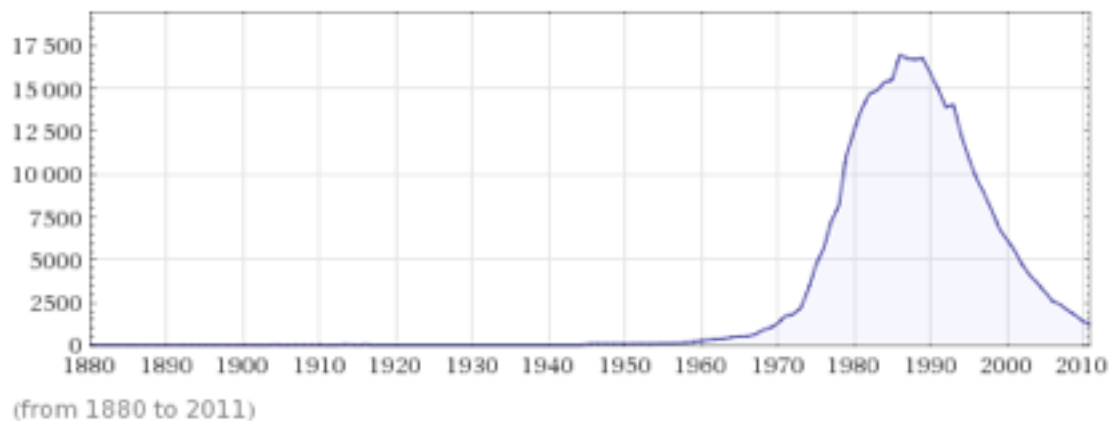


# Fifty Shades of Blue

A few weeks ago at a middle-aged dinner party I attended two very educated women raved about the intoxicating effects of reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*. “I came home every night and totally sunk into it,” said one, “Staying up late into each night until I finished all three volumes. I haven’t been that absorbed since I read *Anna Karenina*.”

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Some peripherally related data: Here is a graph of the number of girls born in the USA with the given name ‘Amber’ since 1880.



Note the sudden flowering in 1944, when an American woman, Kathleen Winsor, wrote a massively popular book, *Forever Amber*, that era’s *Fifty Shades*. According to Wikipedia: “*Forever Amber* tells the story of orphaned Amber St. Clare, who makes her way up through the ranks of 17th century English society by sleeping with and/or marrying successively richer and more important men, while keeping her love for the one man she could never have. ... Fourteen U.S. states banned the book as pornography.”

**Question 1:** Why did so many women start naming their daughters after the sleep-around heroine of what passed for pornography in 1944?

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Now I had assumed that *Fifty Shades* was merely a bodice-ripping romance for women, that, like *Amber*, used ... to indicate an interlude involving sexual acts, but my dinner acquaintances assured me it went into very explicit erotic detail.

“In that case,” said one of the ladies’ husbands, “if it’s explicit detail you like, why not simply look at [porncentrum.com](http://porncentrum.com)? There is stuff on the internet now, for free, with men and women doing things you can’t believe can be shown if you were a teenager in the 50s.”

“Ewww!” said the women in unison at the idea.

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In the interests of accurate reporting, your intrepid and difficult-to-disgust columnist immersed himself in both Book 1 of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy and the porn website, to see if he could apprehend their charms.

Writing as a man, *Fifty Shades* leaves me by and large cold. It involves a young and initially virginal Anastasia Steele (cf. Amber St Claire) and the perverse, stunningly handsome and powerful businessman Christian Grey, bound together, so to speak, in a formal sado-masochistic relationship. Christian requires Anastasia to sign NDAs (nondisclosure agreements) regarding what she will allow him to do to her. Anastasia’s favorite phrase is “Holy Crap.” Please, give me Anna Karenina or Madame Bovary or Jeanne Moreau or Romy Schneider or Catherine Deneuve. Not someone who says “Holy Crap” and “Double Crap.” I must reluctantly confess to a mild interest in understanding how Christian got to be a pervert, but the rest is kind of boringly dirty, and also clearly meant for women.

**Question 2:** Is it something about women that makes so many of them attracted to this best-selling novel featuring one particular peculiarity, bondage and sado-masochism?

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As for porncentrum, your columnist (it sounds much nobler in the third person, no?) discovered that one can select videos from a broad variety of about thirty categories of tastes, many he actually hadn’t known existed. And, unlike *Fifty Shades*, all videos are free, often totally explicit, in full color and quite remarkable sound (sometimes marred, unfortunately, by the voice of the director positioning his cast of two or three).

**Question 3:** Porncentrum is clearly aimed at men. Why is there such a broad variety of erotic entertainment for men, as opposed to just a single one for women?

**Question 4.** What possesses a large number of women of all ages to do very explicit things in full view of close-up cameras? I’m skeptical that it’s the money. This is amateur hour, filmed in kitchens and living rooms, shown for free on the site. The participants can’t be making much money. Are they doing it for a few Euros, Kopecks, Zlotys, Korunas, Yen, etc? Or is it just fun? I suppose you could ask the same question of the men involved.

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Putting aside the blue stuff, men and women have different styles of looking for romance too. The New York Review of Books has for many decades run very literate personal ads. Here is a not atypical one by a man:

ARCHITECT, 60s, 5'11", 190, nonsmoker. Loves good music, movies, cats, puns, and crosswords. Seeking Manhattan lady for museums, concerts, and more. NYR Box xxxxx.

Simple and straightforward. And here are two not atypical recent ones by women:

BEAUTIFUL WITH DEVILISH TWINKLE, a great way of connecting, and generous loving persona. Exudes poise, grace, and readiness for life. Divorced—characterized by male colleagues as “vivacious, smart, and full of fun with terrific sexy, slender figure—adds light and laughter wherever she goes.” Contemporary, hip, insightful, philanthropic, and very present, with an eye for beauty. Beguiled by excitement of travel, adores stepping into unknown cultures, yet believes New England beaches trump Côte d’Azur, Italian Riviera. Reads New Yorker cartoons weekly, works toward social justice, stays fit with biking, yoga. Loves literature, Mozart, Italy anywhere, Wyoming, Kenyan safari, the warm ambiance of meals with friends, lattes, London theater, Ansel Adams. Seeks educated, professionally and personally secure, fit man—50s–65.

GRACE, SUBSTANCE, and just the right amount of sparkle and good looks. Intriguing, passionate, bicultural—harmonious blend of New York and India. Accomplished, published, professional. Sensual self-deprecating charm, keen artistic sensibility. Avid jogger, ardent cook, slender figure, good dancer (performed in India/United States), can be technical klutz (fixing things...). Known for infectious smile, impish mischievousness, easygoing nature, generosity. Intellectual and feminine—loves creating warm, nourishing home, gravitates to Arts/Science New York Times sections, Faulkner, Jhumpa Lahiri, Alvin Ailey, theater, yoga. Admits to guilty pleasures—chocolate, wine, my flatscreen TV for DVDs. Would love to return to Paris or Grand Canyon with special man. Seeking educated, attractive, considerate guy, 50s–60s. In shape, passionate, warm, financially sound, liberal, able to see beyond himself.

The last phrase -- “able to see beyond himself” -- is ironic, given what came before.

**Question 5:** Don’t the female authors see that there is a kind of Heisenberg uncertainty principle about their ads? The more they try to define themselves as appealing, the less appealing they become.

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I am willing to bet that there are a bunch of daughters being born in the USA now with the name Anastasia.

**Final Question:** Isn’t it sad that men and women have (in most cases) only each other to turn to, and yet appear to have such different attitudes to eroticism, love and companionship?