
Smut, Sex and Scandal: Commerce of Controversy in the History of Publishing

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Abstract

This article explores the topic of controversy in book publishing and asks the central question-how can scandal sell a book? In this article two famously controversial books are used to examine the ways society reacts to controversy. These two books are *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D H Lawrence and *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E L James. The article discusses the way these books were deemed obscene, the ways in which culture reacted by censoring them and whether ultimately the controversy worked as a marketing tool for the books. Through analysis of the differing cultures at time of publication and how this affected the reactions from society, the conclusion is that in the publication history of both these books the controversy has been used as a selling tool, and that sometimes sex really does sell.

Keywords

History, culture, censorship, obscenity, controversy

Introduction

Harry Potter, 1984, Ulysses and The Bible. These titles may not seem to have much in common and yet they share a unique claim--they are some of the most commonly banned books from libraries and school reading lists. Controversy around books is nothing new, for as long as publishing has existed the publisher has been viewed as a gatekeeper who controls what is read by the public, what ideas are presented and what content is consumed. But for many, the publisher also becomes a gatekeeper for morality. From this comes ideas of censorship and controversy. This article will look at two controversial cases in publishing history: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which faced an obscenity trial in 1960, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which has faced much debate since its publication in 2011. By examining these two controversial instances of publishing, from two different periods of

history, this article will investigate how the contemporary culture of these books affected their publication and controversy, and will further explore the way this impacted the sales and marketing of the books, including what advantages that scandal may have on the books' sales.

Obscenity: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

The trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960 is the one of the most iconic examples of controversy in British book publishing. However iconic it is though, the most frequently debated aspect of *Lady Chatterley* now is whether it even deserved to be on trial in the first place. The book does detail the sexual relationship of the eponymous heroine, but many argue that the sexual content alone is not enough to be labelled obscene. The question then of course is what did make *Lady Chatterley* obscene? The answer is clear to anyone who witnessed the trial. A comment from Calvin Bedient in *The Hudson Review* not long after the trial says it best: 'Assuming that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* should have been brought to jury and judgement at all, surely it faced the wrong charge. Though it is not pornographic, it is subversive' (Bedient, 1966). Bedient, writing in the midpoint of the sixties is aware of the real obscenity in *Lady Chatterley*, namely not the sex itself but that it occurred between an upper-class woman and a lower-class man. The trial was brought against Penguin, not because the book was overtly sexual or shocking in its content but because of the ideas that it represented. On the very edge of the sexual revolution that would occur in the 1960s, Penguin were progressive in publishing *Lady Chatterley* in a society whose boundaries around class were still so rigid and that would therefore surely create some controversy. However, the 1959 Obscene Publications Act had required books on trial to be taken as a whole and in light of its audience, and as such Penguin could create a good case for *Lady Chatterley* as a whole. They were acquitted, and the public were finally allowed to judge the books obscenity for themselves.

Obscenity: *Fifty Shades of Grey*

The trial of *Fifty Shades of Grey* may not have been a legal trial, but the court of public opinion quickly labelled *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E L James in the obscene category. The case for obscenity in *Fifty Shades* is clear: its plot revolves around a BDSM relationship which is detailed in several explicit sex scenes. The book undoubtedly sits in the erotica genre so surely its obscenity cannot be surprising. However, there were mass boycotts upon its publication and especially upon the release of the film adaptation. Gail Dines, founder and president of organisation Stop Porn Culture which organised many of the boycotts, was quoted saying 'It's a story of abuse, it's a story of violence against women' (CBS News, 2015). The debate around whether the relationship between Christian and Anastasia is abusive was enough in itself to call controversy. This kind of BDSM relationship had never been in the public eye on such a wide level and of course led to conversations around consent in our culture. And within that lies the real reason that *Fifty Shades* was seen as obscene. It was not the sexual content that made it obscene, that has been seen before in erotica for decades: it was that it had been made so mainstream by its acquisition by Vintage Books in 2011. As Lynn Commella puts it, 'Fifty Shades "is not a book with sex in it," Williams offered, "it is a sex book," one written to titillate and arouse its ostensibly female readers through vivid descriptions of sexual domination and submission, complete with blindfolds, riding crops, and wrist restraints' (Comella, 2015). It is not that the sex was so obscene, it was that Vintage dared to publish this 'sex book' and take it from the relatively less mainstream world of self-publishing. Vintage took *Fifty Shades* from translated fanfiction with a small readership to the bestseller with the lucrative three-film adaptation and in that they took the scorned erotic genre from its shadowy corners and placed it firmly in the light.

Censorship: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

When publishing daring titles, publishers have to manage a fine balance between controversy and censorship. Enough scandal can generate a lot of interest but too much can

tip the balance into banned books, and smaller readerships as a consequence. By the time of the *Chatterley* trial, books were slowly becoming broader in their audiences. Hence, the trial of *Lady Chatterley* revolved so much around the much-quoted phrase of prosecutor Griffith-Jones: 'Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or servants to read?' This statement reflects the way censorship was being used at this time. It was not always the blatant book-burning and blacklisting that people often think of, rather it was upper class white men in power deciding what could get read and by whom. These men measured worth by their own privileged standards, scandalised at a book which portrayed class in a much more modern way. As Christopher Halliard says, 'The reference to wives and servants was a blunt reminder that the question of who could be trusted to read what was a question about social difference' (Halliard, 2013). Hence, the censorship was not just about stopping people reading *Lady Chatterley* but stopping what men like Griffith-Jones viewed as the most impressionable types of people reading about issues of female sexuality and class. And Penguin for their part were most guilty for publishing it at a price that would make it so easy for the mass public to consume it. Geoffrey Robertson states 'The key factor in the decision to prosecute was that Penguin proposed to sell the book for 3/6; in other words, to put it within easy reach of women and the working classes' (Robertson, 2010). Penguin were not just spreading the ideas of *Lady Chatterley* that these men deemed obscene, they were all but handing them to the people who would be most affected by it. Access to these stories had to be restricted and so the gatekeepers who had been in control for so long used censorship to attempt just that. But these attitudes were changing, and Penguin was on the right side of the coming revolution.

Censorship: *Fifty Shades of Grey*

By 2011, the publication year of *Fifty Shades*, censorship had become much less normalised. In a modern world focused on free speech, nobody could deign to hold a legal trial to condemn *Fifty Shades of Grey*. However, the censorship of *Fifty Shades of Grey* still exists in that people are actively trying to prevent people from accessing it. One form of this exists in the boycotts mentioned above, with people rallying the general public to abandon both the

book and film adaptations. These boycotts are not an explicit ban, more of a protest against the content of the book. Censorship for *Fifty Shades of Grey* is actually created in the stigma that is placed on those reading the book. Barbara M Jones, in a report from American Libraries says librarians worry about 'wanting to buy the book but fearing blowback' (Jones, 2012). The societal shame that has been placed on *Fifty Shades* means that people do not have to try and ban it, they simply have to make it embarrassing to read. This form of censorship can be seen by people hiding away their copies, pretending they have not read it or mocking it if they do read it. As an erotic book in the mainstream it is branded 'mummy porn', scorned for its low quality of writing and looked at with general disdain. The gatekeepers have clearly labelled it as low value and therefore placed fear in people who want to be seen as reading books of higher literary merit. Flic Everett says, 'Middle-class bookshelves are as carefully curated as any art exhibition, crafted to reflect us in the best possible light' (Everett, 2016). Everett is portraying the shame that is placed on books like *Fifty Shades* which are classed as low art. This shows how censorship has evolved in the years since *Lady Chatterley* from outright banning to snide, sneaky comments that degrade the books and the people who read it by association.

The Commerce of Controversy: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

The controversy and censorship of both *Lady Chatterley* and *Fifty Shades* did little to dent sales, despite the efforts made by gatekeepers. For *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the very public trial added additional benefits for Penguin. They sold out of the first run of over 200,000 copies on the first day of publication (BBC News, 1960). According to BBC News, 'London's largest bookstore, W&G Foyle Ltd, said its 300 copies had gone in just 15 minutes and it had taken orders for 3,000 more copies' (BBC News, 1960). This clearly shows how the controversy around *Lady Chatterley* fuelled the curiosity of the reading public. This combined with the easy accessibility talked about earlier led to more sales than Penguin could have anticipated. Hence, the controversy and scandal around *Lady Chatterley* seems to have been largely beneficial for Penguin. The question, therefore, is was this all simply part of the plan? Penguin may have been prepared for an obscenity trial due to the

controversial nature of what they were publishing but it does not seem that they tried to commercialise on the sexuality of the book prior to the trial. The cover is hardly salacious, it features a simple drawing of a bird. There are no blockbuster headlines declaring it for its obscenity. Penguin surely relished the publicity that the trial had afforded, but the scandal does not seem to be at the crux of the marketing for their book. It can be seen, however, in later editions and reprints of the book. One American reprint, for example has the sub-heading 'The great novel that shocked the world' as well as cover art featuring a man and woman in bed (Baker, 2016). So, while Penguin may not have initially used the shocking sexuality of *Lady Chatterley* to create sales, it's clearly been a common technique to highlight the infamous scandal in order to market the book.

The Commerce of Controversy: *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Fifty Shades of Grey has now become the bestselling book of all time. In terms of the marketing on behalf of Vintage for these books there were several points of controversy that they could have used in publicising the books. First of all, its self-published history meant there was already a fan base and a certain level of awareness to build on. This pre-existing fanbase which could be doubled to include those aware of its fanfiction past would create a perfect starting point to spread word of mouth controversy about the book. And without a doubt the public buzz around *Fifty Shades of Grey* increased with the film adaptation. Vintage then published film tie-ins for the books which included a sexual scene from the book, further illustrating the controversy of *Fifty Shades*. This marketing clearly worked, as the Nielsen data for years surrounding the release of *Fifty Shades* shows. They reported that in the first-quarter of 2014 15% of romance books purchased, compared with 12% in 2013 and that romance readers are getting younger with an average age of 42, down from 44 (Nielsen, 2015). These statistics suggest that *Fifty Shades* has been responsible not just for its own high sales but for generating the huge surge in the romance genre and creating a wider range of readership. While it cannot be clear how much of this success is generated by the controversy around *Fifty Shades*, it seems clear that the amount of publicity that the scandalous aspects of both *Fifty Shades* and *Lady Chatterley* garnered

created a huge success for their respective publishers. As such the controversy in itself seems to be its own marketing tool, and one that has been used for decades.

Conclusion

There are two relevant conclusions to make about this topic. Firstly, it is clear that the contemporary cultures of both *Lady Chatterley* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* had a huge impact on how the society of the time reacted to the controversy. *Lady Chatterley's* trial and subsequent British publication in 1960 placed it just at the start of the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and as such the contemporary society could be much outwardly outraged and reactionary in regard to banning the book and labelling it obscene. When it came to *Fifty Shades*, modern society had become more accepting of sex and freedom of speech as a whole and as such the stigma and shame around *Fifty Shades* was largely conducted through a mocking takedown of those who deemed it of low value. Secondly, the very scandal place on these books can be its own selling tool. Whether the publishers lean into it or not, the controversy around *Lady Chatterley* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* was responsible for the huge success that both achieved. And therefore, in summary, those gatekeepers who deride the books as obscene become their own worst enemy. Publishers will always have to balance perfectly between free publicity and public condemnation. But if the balance can be struck, the rewards can clearly be great.

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