A POST FIFTY SHADES OF GREY EXAMINATION OF CANADIAN PUBLIC LIBRARY COLLECTIONS (Paper submission)

Abstract (50-100 words)
The phenomenon surrounding Fifty Shades of Grey (FSG) created a new and public conversation about erotica and erotic romance literature. Although the phenomenon surrounding FSGO has not been without its detractors, the sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance has continued to increase and publishing houses have been expanding the genre through the sales of FSOG. The focus for this research is not on the romance genre broadly, rather the combined sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance. The release of Fifty Shades of Grey (FSG) in 2012 was greeted with a level of interest not seen before in an erotic romance title (Bentley, 2012). The phenomenon surrounding the text created a new and public conversation about erotica/erotic romance, mostly in relation to sexually-explicit content. Six years later the phenomenon surrounding FSGO has faded, but the sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance is still of interest.

1. Introduction
The romance genre is one of the highest circulating genres in public libraries, while also being a genre that has been historically smudged, both within and outside of LIS (Adkins, Esser, Velasquez, 2010; Charles & Linz, 2005; Adkins, Esser, Velasquez, & Hill, 2008). At the same time, the genre has never lacked reviews in various media and it has an established place in public libraries. The publication in 2012 of Kristen Ramstad’s Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre is evidence of the embrace of romance. The focus for this research is not on the romance genre broadly, rather the combined sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance. The release of Fifty Shades of Grey (FSG) in 2012 was greeted with a level of interest not seen before in an erotic romance title (Bentley, 2012). The phenomenon surrounding the text created a new and public conversation about erotica/erotic romance, mostly in relation to sexually-explicit content. Six years later the phenomenon surrounding FSGO has faded, but the sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance is still of interest.

Changing sexual mores are referred to as one of the main reasons for the drift to broad acceptance of romance, likely along with its sheer popularity amongst patrons. Given the popularity of the FSG phenomenon, might the romance sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance also be benefiting from a change in perception? This research is an exploratory and introductory effort to understand the proliferation of this genre both within traditional reviewing media and Canadian public library collections. It allows us to further investigate free access to materials with sexual content in Canadian library collections.

2. Literature
In libraries, there have been some interesting conversations around FSGO. It was welcomed by many and has been used by some readers’ advisory librarians to discuss how to develop collections in this genre (Bourrier, 2016). But FSGO was not without its detractors as a small number of libraries made headlines for deciding, initially, not to purchase the books for their collections (Beaudoin, 2012; Gall, 2012). Except for Martinez, et al (2016), self-censorship of libraries has been little studied recently, but is of interest in the current research.

3. Method
In the fall of 2017, six traditional and nontraditional LIS review sources were searched for erotica/erotic romance reviews. Traditional sources include Library Journal, Publishers’ Weekly, Novelists, and Kirkus. Non-traditional sources include the Smart Bitches, Trashy Books blog and Buzzfeed. In order to consider the notion of change, we purposefully chose broad, well-known review sources rather than genre-specific resources such as Romantic Times. Non-traditional sources were included to ensure a wide variety of reviews that were not all focused on the same audience, librarians and the publishing industry. Each source was examined for erotica/erotic romance title reviews. The final list of reviewed titles for this research is 742.

These 742 titles were then located in WordCat, with an initial focus on worldwide English language holdings. Given the large variety of formats available for each title, the focus was only on the version collected by the most libraries - be that print, ebook, audiobook, etc. The WordCat search was then narrowed to examine Canadian library holdings, with a focus on public libraries.

Lastly, we compared the 742 reviewed titles with the actual holdings of the erotica/erotic romance collection of a large sized public library. In this instance, the library’s catalogue includes a genre classification for ‘erotic stories’ which included 251 titles for comparison with the 742 review titles. Given the variety of possible subject headings for erotica/erotic romance titles, the focus, instead, was on genre classification.

4. Findings

a) What erotica/erotic romance titles are reviewed?
The overwhelming majority of the 742 reviewed titles found in WordCat were for the print format. Only a handful of books were in other formats and those were generally self-published. Findings also indicate that although erotic titles are dense as far as sexual content, they are not diverse as far as colour or ethnicity. This finding follows the characteristics of titles in ALA’s banned book report (Doyle, 2016) and the findings from the Ripped Bodice’s (2017) research on diversity in romance publishing.

Most of the 742 reviewed titles were traditionally published, with only a very small number of self-published titles. Given the current binary distinction between small publishing house and self-published works, no firm numbers are available to distinguish between the two. Kensington, Urban, St. Martin’s, Storbor, and Simon & Schuster are the most prevalent publishers. Crimson, a publisher noted by the Ripped Bodice (2017) study as being the most diverse with 29.3% of its titles featuring characters of colour does not appear in any of the 742 reviews examined.

b) What is the trend of erotic/erotic romance reviews post-FSOG?
Publication dates for the books, themselves, ranged from 1992 to 2017 with one outlier title published in 1969. Reviews averaged between 0 and 11 per year through 2005, 2005 showed an increase that continued until a peak in 2008 (with 44 reviews reviewed), after which numbers began to drop. It was not until post-FSOG that titles spiked again, and in much larger numbers. 2013 saw 47 titles reviewed with an all-time spike of 153 reviewed titles in 2014. There was some drop off in 2015 with another spike of 124 titles reviewed in 2016.

A combination of events has resulted in erotica/erotic romance to have significantly more reviews than the pre-FSOG era, namely there are more review sources focused on the genre. In 2005, the Smart Bitches Trashy Books blog began spreading knowledge of books that might otherwise been under the radar. In 2013, Library Journal and Publishers’ Weekly both began publishing dedicated erotic romance reviews. Lastly, FSGO influenced the recommendation lists reviewed.

c) What erotica/erotic romance is collected in Canadian public libraries?
Findings show a mismatch between the formal and informal review sources examined and public library collections. Approximately two-thirds of the titles are available in Canada, but this does not adequately reflect a full penetration of these erotic titles across Canadian libraries. For example, the novel If Not for Us is available in Canada, but there are only 5 copies nationwide, versus 966 in the United States. The provinces offering the broadest access to erotica titles include Alberta and Ontario.

Narrowing the scope to a specific, large, library provides further comment on this research question. A sample of a particular library’s ILS allowed a genre classification for ‘erotic stories’ that includes 251 titles. The majority are print titles with a limited number of ebooks and audiobooks. Prominent publishers include St. Martin’s, Berkley, Cleis, and New American Library. Publication dates of books in the collection closely match the publication range in the initial list of 742 titles reviewed. The first spike in titles happens in the 2005-2008 period with a small drop until another spike in 2011-2014. Of significant interest is the fact that four authors make up almost a quarter (61) of the library’s holdings of erotica/erotic romance.

5. Discussion
The traditional LIS universe experiences constant expansion when new areas of emphasis are conceived, and sexually explicit content seems in the erotica/erotic romance sub-genre is no exception. For example, publishing houses continue to increase their erotica/erotic romance titles (Chalmers, 2015), and scholarly outlets are now available for academic work focusing on research about sexually explicit products and consumption of those products (See the relatively new Routledge journal Porn Studies with the first issue in 2014). Between the increased visibility of the genre for readers, and the fact that the American Library Association (ALA) notes that sexually explicit content remains one of the major reasons for challenged and banned books (Doyle, 2016), it is important to study this genre in a Canadian context. But even with this broader level of acceptance comes significant shortcomings in the diversity of offerings from publishers and review sources and, hence, a lack of diversity in public library collections.

There are also significant shortcomings in the numbers of communities that are collecting these works. While the titles reviewed and the non-traditional sources might be explained off as not talking to a broad enough audience, the books reviewed in the traditional sources are not being widely collected. Whether this points to self-censorship remains to be definitively proven and additional study is necessary.

Given the small number of reviews that exist in traditional sources, there was an expectation of larger collection holdings. If collection development librarians are not using these resources, are they using others? Future research will continue to map our set of 742 reviewed titles onto other public libraries across Canada and compare the library-specific genre classification for erotica/erotic romance titles. In addition, genre-specific sources like the Romantic Times will provide an even broader variety of titles to help investigate public library collections. A data set with collection management librarians at Canadian public libraries will also offer insight into the mismatch between reviewed titles and purchased titles to further understand the landscape of the erotica/erotic romance in Canada. With future work, we will connect the broader issues of library collection policies, self-censorship, and user-driven collections with the relationship among publishers, reviewers and librarians.

Reference List:


