

EL James sits with her legs crossed, her tight purple dress inching precariously towards her knee. Her left foot fidgets so much it's a wonder her peep-toe stiletto doesn't fall off.

When she speaks, her stilted sentences are peppered with swear words and punctuated with nervous laughter. In the flesh, she is more attractive than unflattering paparazzi pictures suggest. The berry pedicure, bronzed skin and glossy blow dry indicate a woman at least trying to come to terms with her sudden rise to fame. Yet the overall effect is still more startled suburban housewife than self-assured star.

EL James – or Erika Mitchell, as she is otherwise known – has said she's uncomfortable with her new notoriety. Since her erotic novel *Fifty Shades Of Grey* became the fastest – and biggest – selling book of all time, she has struggled to avoid the limelight. Hot on the heels of *Fifty Shades Of Grey* came *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*; since their release last year, the trilogy has sold more than 40 million copies. Hollywood has clamoured for the film rights and there have been a host of lucrative merchandising opportunities, including the *Fifty Shades Of Grey* album (featuring 'sexy' tracks from Chopin to Britney Spears). It is at the launch of this – at a London private members' club – that we meet.

If the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon has taken the world by surprise, it's safe to say nobody is more shocked than Erika herself. "It's overwhelming," she admits. "This thing has taken off like nobody could have seen. I still don't quite believe it."

Few are unfamiliar with Christian Grey, the troubled Seattle billionaire businessman who subjects the virginal (and compliant) student Anastasia Steele to his bondage fantasies before – spoiler alert – the pair realise their chemistry extends beyond Christian's Red Room of Pain. Theirs is, at heart, a predictable love story, albeit one spiced up with whips, chains and nipple clamps.

But for all that's been said about Erika's books, the woman herself remains an enigma. She rarely speaks to the press and when she appears in public, she is often well protected. Today's audience is a rare occurrence. "Why is it that you don't like giving interviews?" I ask Erika as she makes her way off stage. She pauses, bewildered, before replying: "Because I am always misquoted." Before I get a chance to continue the conversation, she is taken by her elbows and marched away by two female assistants.

So who is Erika Mitchell? Now 49, she was born in London to a Chilean mother and a Scottish father, who worked as a BBC cameraman. She was brought up in Buckinghamshire and privately educated. "I used to write stories when I was at school," she says. "My teacher – I was about 11 at the time – often read them out to the class, because I used to include my friends in them. I've always yearned to write for an audience."

After studying history at the University of Kent, she got a job as a studio manager's assistant at the National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield. It was there she met Niall ▶

*She's made whips and nipple clamps mainstream. But what do we really know about the woman behind the FIFTY SHADES OF GREY phenomenon? Antonia Hoyle gets an EXCLUSIVE audience with ERIKA MITCHELL, author of the fastest-selling book of all time*

# WHO IS THE REAL EL James!

Leonard, the droll Northern Irishman who has nicknamed Erika 'dragon' and describes himself as "the least romantic fecker that ever lived". They married in 1987 and spent their twenties establishing their careers – Erika as a television producer and Niall, 53, as a scriptwriter (his credits include *Silent Witness* and *Wire In The Blood*). When Erika was in her early thirties, they had two sons, now 17 and 15 (whose names she has kept private).

Erika sought solace in novels. "I read a lot of romantic fiction when I was on the hideous Tube journey in and out of London. The books had embarrassing covers, which I used to try and hide," she admits. Nonetheless, she ploughed her way through hundreds. By her mid-forties, she was successful but unhappy. "I worked for a company I was incredibly miserable at," she says, declining to elaborate.

It wasn't until 2008 that she found a viable escape, thanks to the first *Twilight* film, adapted from Stephenie Meyer's novel. Entranced by the love story between Edward Cullen and Bella Swan, Erika asked her husband to buy her all four books that Christmas. By the January, they had "flipped a switch" and inspired her to write.

At first she wrote fan fiction under the pen name of Snowqueens Icedragon, imagining scenarios between Cullen and Swan, and posting her chapters on FanFiction.net. But then she developed the characters of Anastasia and Christian, and the plot for *Fifty Shades* was born. "This was my mid-life crisis. I didn't buy a sports car or have an affair. I wrote," she says. "I'd read some bondage and sadomasochism stuff, and found it really hot."

She spent every spare minute typing to the likes of Bach and The Black Eyed Peas – music, she says, inspired her sex scenes – and Niall helped compile and edit the manuscript. Didn't this cause minor domestics? "We annoy the hell out of each other," admits Erika, "But generally we get on really well."

It took her 18 months to complete the trilogy. Her online readership gradually grew and, inspired by a friend who had landed an online publishing deal, she emailed a small Australian company, The Writer's Coffee Shop, in January last year. They signed her on a print-on-demand, e-book contract. The first edition of *Fifty Shades Of Grey* was published as an e-book last May; *Fifty Shades Darker* followed in September and *Fifty Shades Freed* debuted this January. Initially, only a few hundred copies sold a week. But then, something extraordinary happened.

Women from their teens to their nineties began to tell each other about the e-book that had reinvigorated their relationships. They also told Erika, who read their emails in tears. It didn't seem to matter that her prose was sometimes poor and the erotica cringe-inducing. She had tapped into the unexplored



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genre of pornography for women – or 'mummy porn' as it became known, on account of the number of housewives reading it.

By the end of 2011, *Fifty Shades* had become a Twitter sensation and Erika received a spate of emails enquiring about film rights. "Imagine me in a group of Hollywood producers [talking] about orgasms!" she says. After a bidding war, the rights went to Universal in March for £3.2million. The same month, Erika left her independent publisher, which was struggling to keep up with demand, and signed a deal with Vintage believed to be worth £3.5million. Only then were hard copies of the book printed. Mindful of the tasteless covers of the novels she used to devour, Erika designed the covers herself, with a simple image of a grey silk tie and, for the subsequent novels, a slightly more daring yet still discreet silver mask and a key respectively.

*Fifty Shades* quickly climbed to the top of the Amazon charts. By September, her books were numbers one, two and three on *The New York Times* Best Seller list. "Every week, we'd get reports of a sales record Erika had broken and we'd sit in our tatty Brentford kitchen trying to take it all in," says Niall.

Most debut novels are assumed to be at least in part autobiographical and Erika has, at times, seemed happy to admit as much. "I would be writing one of the steamy scenes and I'd look at Niall, and he'd roll his eyes and say, 'Well, if you must.' Then I'd ask him to try out the various moves." She adds, "I'm a terrible flirt, so the emails [between Christian and Anastasia] are like the ones I write." But today, at least, Erika seems keen to dismiss the debauchery as fantasy – perhaps at the insistence of her husband, who you can imagine burying his head in his hands every time she is asked whether he beats her in the bedroom.

The problem with this tactic, however, is that Niall comes across as a bit of a bore, their marriage uneventful and her masterpiece a desperate quest for escape. "When you fall in love, you have a lot of sex – at least from what I can remember. If you've been married for 400 years, as I have, it's nice to experience first love again. It takes you away from doing the dishes and the laundry," she says wistfully, adding, "To me, Christian is the ultimate fantasy man. We've all dreamed of a partner who is so terribly rich that he can buy you anything you want. The kinky sex stuff really was a fantasy."

Until September, Erika had never been to Seattle and did her geographical research on Google Street View. She investigated

## Searching for the next Fifty Shades? Here are the best contenders

### 1 *With My Body* by Nikki Gemmill (Fourth Estate, £7.99)

An unhappy Gloucestershire housewife goes for a walk and ends up being kissed by a neighbour. Cue memories of her sexual awakening in the Australian bush. Short chapters and a fast-moving story make this a compelling read, but those in search of lots of erotic stimulation may be disappointed.

### 2 *Destined To Play* by Indigo Bloome (Harper Collins, £5.99)

The debut novel is mummy porn for those who find EL James a little, well, tame. Alexandra, 37, is living a bland life with her husband and kids. When reunited with a former lover on a work trip, she finds herself at his mercy. Written in Alexandra's voice, behind a blindfold, this is a quirky take on erotica.

### 3 *In Too Deep* by Portia da Costa (Virgin, £7.99)

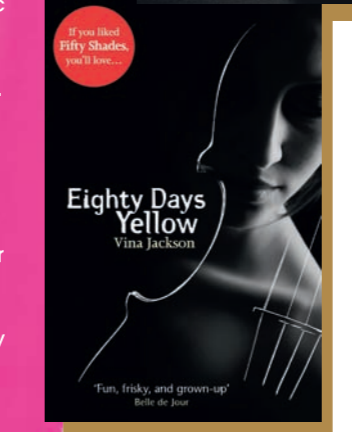
Librarian Gwendolyne's fantasies are unleashed when an admirer leaves her a naughty letter. After embarking on a steamy fling with a rugged library visitor, she soon realises that the toe-curlingly sensual correspondence with her mystery man isn't enough and makes it her mission to find him.

### 4 *Bared To You* by Sylvia Day (Penguin, £7.99)

Eva has a neurotic mother and a killer body; while gazillionaire Gideon has a complex family, an enormous manhood and a penchant for kinky sex. The graphic bits are very racy and with similar characters to *Fifty Shades*, it's the perfect way for fans to fill the void.

### 5 *Eighty Days Yellow* by Vina Jackson (Orion, £7.99)

Summer starts seeing professor Viktor after he offers to replace her broken violin – in exchange for a BDSM relationship. Written under a pseudonym of two writers, the lusty thoughts of both dominant and submissive are revealed in this hot-under-the-collar read.



the S&M lifestyle by visiting explicit websites. "I have this fear social services are going to find my computer and my sons are going to be taken away from me," she says, laughing. She denies the allegation that her books promote sexual violence, saying there is nothing wrong with harbouring desires to be tied up and whipped, like Anastasia. "As long as it's safe and with common sense, I don't see a problem."

There is an endearing naïvety to her beliefs. "People like the sex, but they especially like the passionate love story. It was the love story that held it together for me." She insists her mother and 82-year-old aunt hardly batted an eyelid on turning its pages. However, she admits that her late father probably wouldn't have been quite so accepting. "I'd have said, 'Dad, don't read this!'"

Despite her estimated fortune – she is said to be earning more than £800,000 a week from royalties – she has always insisted she is not motivated by money. One of her few concessions to wealth so far is treating herself to made-to-measure Rigby & Peller bras. "But," she is at pains to point out, "they don't have tassels or anything raunchy." She shrugs off reports she and Niall are about to swap their £350,000 house for a £3million mansion. Niall – whose own debut novel, the thriller *Crusher*, was published in September and promoted on the coat-tails of his wife's success – writes in the garden shed and meets Erika for coffee breaks in the kitchen. "I've been pushing him to write a book for 20 years," she says. "But it took me to write one first."

Theirs is a lifestyle notable only for its normality. There is, granted, a red-painted room in their home, but it is used for doing the ironing. When Erika is not on a book tour, she is ferrying her sons around, or walking Max, the family's West Highland terrier. She likes the occasional cigarette, a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and eating Nutella straight from the jar. She enjoys Twitter, yearns to take a holiday and is, by her own admission, exhausted.

She is an ordinary woman thrown by her extraordinary circumstances. Which is why, at the launch of the *Fifty Shades* album, surrounded by champagne-swilling women and waiters wearing silver masks, she seems so ill at ease. This is a slick environment calculated to enhance the *Fifty Shades* brand that has brought erotic fiction into the mainstream. Yet it is not one in which a decidedly down-to-earth writer, whose vocabulary is littered with "f\*\*\*" and "Jesus Christ on a bicycle", necessarily belongs.

So how to market a woman who has written the world's best-selling novel yet whose own life doesn't match up to the resulting hype? Erika puts it most succinctly before she scurries back to her dressing room. Sometimes, she says, "It's best to keep your mouth shut." ●