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Sexy, viral novel series brings Seattle '50 Shades of Green'

Seattle is the playground of Christian Grey, the fictional billionaire at the heart of E.L. James' racy novel, "Fifty Shades of Grey." As a movie based on the book will open in movie theaters in time for Valentine's Day, local businesses are experiencing some spillover.

By [Ángel González](#)

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Paris has Quasimodo and D'Artagnan. London has Oliver Twist. Seattle now has Christian Grey, the tech billionaire and BDSM heartthrob whose exploits are chronicled in E.L. James' "Fifty Shades of Grey" trilogy, one of the best-selling book series ever.

And as a movie based on the racy novels opens in movie theaters in time for Valentine's Day, local businesses are making the most of it.

The Edgewater Hotel has a special offer dubbed "No Grey Area." It includes the use of an Audi R8 Spyder, Grey's car in the novel, and a helicopter tour of Seattle. Champagne, a Kama Sutra book, aphrodisiac appetizers and valet parking are also thrown in. The cost seems also designed to lure tech billionaires: \$14,169 a night.

The Salish Lodge offers a much more affordable package (starting at about \$389 a night) dubbed 50 Shades of Salish. It features rose petals in the room, absinthe cocktails and a book called "Great Sex Weekend" by University of Washington sociology professor and romance expert Pepper Schwartz, who consults for the hotel. The packages are "selling very well," said Erin Osborne, a spokeswoman for the company that runs the Salish Lodge, which is out by Snoqualmie Falls and doesn't play a part in the books.



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Sale prices have jumped 75 percent at the Escala, where much of the book "Fifty Shades of Grey" takes place.

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Zovo, a local chain of lingerie shops, is running a Fifty Shades promotion, with events on Thursday evenings ranging from games and prizes to demonstrations by pole-fitness instructors. It dressed the window at its University Village store with a mannequin sporting a gray and black striped tie and surrounded by bondage gear.

Lisa Berman, CEO of Peekay Boutiques, a locally based chain of sex stores oriented to women, says the Fifty Shades phenomenon is a boon for her industry and for businesses willing to embrace it.

Many retailers didn't anticipate the runaway success of a book series where bondage and sadomasochism play a central role. But now they are "fully prepared to take advantage of the launch of this movie," she said, adding that Peekay was planning marketing and ad campaigns timed with the movie launch.

"The Fifty Shades phenomenon did not just increase awareness about sex toys, it started a revolution around embracing one's sexuality and everything that goes with it," she said.

Whatever the literary merit of James' works, the hubbub surrounding them gives Seattle — a land of fleece, Subarus and geeks — a surprisingly risqué luster. It's as unlikely as a tech billionaire here wearing a tie like Grey's (which he also uses as a bondage prop in the series.) Blame it on a London writer researching the Pacific Northwest through the Internet.

But to some it's a welcome boost for self-image — and tourism.

"It speaks to just how much exposure Seattle's gotten over the last years as a great place to live," says Lenny Zilz, an executive at Columbia Hospitality, which manages the Escala luxury condominium building. That's where the fictional Grey resides and has his private dungeon.

Of course, it's not the first time Seattle's fictional appearances draw a crowd. Filming locations for "Sleepless in Seattle" — the Athenian Inn at Pike Place Market and the houseboat — are still famous.

"Frasier" wasn't shot in Seattle, but out-of-towners often ask about that landmark Space Needle view. Same for the "Grey's Anatomy" fictional hospital. And David Lynch fans still seek "Twin Peaks" at Snoqualmie Falls; in fact, the Salish Lodge also offers a "Twin Peaks" package and says "Twin Peaks" memorabilia in its store is "selling like crazy."

But the popularity of Fifty Shades is hard to match. The series has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide, giving "Lord of the Rings" and Harry Potter a run for their money. Industry trade publication BoxOffice.com forecasts the movie to gross \$89 million during its opening on Presidents Day weekend, a record for the holiday, according to Bloomberg News.

"You can't ignore something like that," said Schwartz, the UW sociology professor, in an interview about the Fifty Shades phenomenon. She says its impact resembles that of D.H. Lawrence's once-controversial book, "Lady Chatterley's Lover." Its lure: a "very sexy story wrapped into a love story" that went viral thanks to the Internet, she said.

Fifty Shades' fallout will be hard to quantify. "Even 20 years later, visitors still ask about "Sleepless in Seattle" and want to see the houseboat, the waterways and bridges and other romantic locales used in the film," said David Blandford, a spokesman for Visit Seattle.

But, "It's too early to know" whether Fifty Shades "will have a significant impact," he said.

The spotlight cast by Fifty Shades can pose challenges for places like the 31-story Escala, at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Virginia Street, which has become a landmark for fans of the book.

"People have been asking about the Escala particularly since the book came out," said Thom Hubert, director of tour development for the Ride the Ducks tours.

Plenty of tourists pose for pictures in front of the fancy nameplate outside Escala; but the building's concierges are "vigilant" about protecting residents' privacy, Columbia Hospitality's Zilz said.

The residents board declined a request from the production company that shot the movie to film inside the building, but they allowed a shot from the roof, Zilz said.

That said, some Escala condo owners have capitalized on the building's association with the book. A recent ad on real-estate website Zillow calls a \$1.25 million two-bedroom condo there "Fifty Shades of Beautiful!"

An Airbnb rental posting advertising the building's sexiness came up recently but was taken down immediately when the management company protested (no short term rentals are allowed).

And residents were treated to a book signing by E.L. James when she took a tour of the building in 2012, according to Zilz. She hadn't been there before writing the books.

It's unclear whether Fifty Shades has had a positive impact on the value of property at Escala. But Zillow calculates that the median sale price there has gone up 75 percent since 2010, to about \$882,500, while the median sale price for Seattle condos has gone up 9 percent.

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