



# Playing

*Melanie Abrams*

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## **Playing** Melanie Abrams

Melanie Abrams's debut novel is a provocative tale about love, betrayal, and how one young woman's unconventional sexual reawakening uncovers the most guarded parts of her past.

When Josie, an anthropology grad student, is unexpectedly offered a job as the nanny for six-year-old Tyler, she innocently accepts. Though Josie doesn't necessarily need the job, there's something about Tyler's single mom, Mary--her beauty, her confidence, her resemblance to Josie's mother--that draws Josie in. While her quick intimacy with Mary soothes Josie's estrangement from her own parents, it also breeds betrayal when Josie falls for Mary's crush, Devesh. An Indian surgeon ten years Josie's senior, Devesh is a strong and enigmatic man who pulls Josie into a dizzying world of sexual domination and submission that speaks to her deeply hidden desires. It is a world of games that fast becomes serious, forcing Josie to confront the darkest moments of her past as she desperately struggles with her family history, her own violent impulses, and her love for Devesh.

Rapturous, illuminating, and emotionally charged, *Playing* is an unflinching look at the irrevocable consequences of giving in to our most secret passions, and the freedom and imprisonment that comes with true self-knowledge.

## **Playing Details**

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# From Reader Review *Playing* for online ebook

## Katie Schenckan says

TL;DR: Wasn't as trashy as I'd expected; still, not a contender for a re-read.

Okay, so this book wasn't as bad as the cover seems to presage. It's actually a complex story about a troubled young woman who does not represent (what I imagine to be) the majority of the S&M community. Josie constantly asks herself why she feels the need for pain and pleasure, and it's a decently paced tale showing us (and her) the reasons that might be.

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## Juushika says

Josie works happily as a nanny—not because she needs the money, but because her employer, who reminds her of her mother, has adopted her as part of the family—until she meets a seductive, dominant man named Devesh. Josie has always had fantasies about submission, and is swiftly pulled away from her adopted family and into a BDSM relationship with Devesh. But Josie's desire for punishment runs deep, and she begins to suspect that it may be unhealthy—and may stem from events in her past. Abrams attempts to write a novel about the psychology behind one woman's would-be-exaggerated masochist tendencies—but Josie's desires are not particularly extreme, and the psychological aspects are underdeveloped and brought to an unnaturally abrupt end. The book has a beautiful cover—and more importantly a promising concept that gives rise to some to a handful of interesting and erotic scenes. But on the whole, *Playing* is a failed attempt which lacks true conflict or psychological analysis. Not recommended.

*Playing* is intended to be a novel in the line of the Marquise de Sade or *The Story of O*: a novel of sex and psychology which exaggerates the sexual desires of submission and dominances, sadism and masochism, in order to explore what they reveal about human psychology. As such, Abrams begins with a protagonist who has, for as long as she can remember, desired to be punished, bound, and abused, fantasizing about it during "normal" sex acts but also on her own, both aroused and comforted by the thought. When she begins a relationship with Devesh, an eager dominant, Josie is for the first time able to put her fantasies into practice—which raises questions of why she has such desires and how far they extend. Josie believes that her desires are abnormal, and in some ways they are a literal fetish: she must evoke her violent fantasies in order to achieve orgasm. Josie then traces this apparently innate, extreme desire back to childhood trauma.

Some of these concerns—such as the root of submissive or masochistic desires—are quite normal, but reading about them sounds a bit routine, as if Josie's arguments with Devesh are a set of pros and cons picked up off the internet. The rest of Josie's concerns—that her desires are abnormally extreme or unhealthy, that they result from past trauma—amount to very little, despite Abram's attempts to make them major conflicts. The violence which Josie submits to is more than a spanking, but well within the realm of a real-world BDSM relationship. Her fantasies are somewhat more extreme, but hardly unreasonable. All of this could still be a valid problem if her desires had an unhealthy origin, and the book slowly builds up to a repressed and certain traumatic childhood memory. However, immediately after Josie confronts this memory, she comes to terms with her it and all of her problems, with herself and with her sexual desires, disappear. The ending is so short and so simple that Josie's problems, the central conflict of the book, seem like absolutely nothing. If they were as big as Josie believed and they appear to the reader, they could never be dismissed so easily. Abrams's fails in her attempt to analyze psychology within sexuality because she

does not explore the long-lasting impact caused by real psychological fetishes.

The rest of the book's strengths and weaknesses are secondary in the face of this fatal flaw. Abram's writing is a bit strange, but still readable—she prefers unusual metaphors (guilt settling like the weight of a cat on her chest, and similar) and dream sequences, and when Josie finally recalls her suppressed memory the narration switches from past to present tense. The oddities quickly go from unique to simply strange, but the text remains readable with a soft, almost lyrical narrative voice. Characterization is simplistic, but the cast of characters fulfill their roles in the plot—Devesh brings Josie's issues of sex and submission to the forefront, and her employer and charges mirror Josie's estranged mother and her (childhood) self. The erotic elements benefit from Abrams's lyrical, almost distracted writing style—they are idealized and yet given an abrupt, harsh edge which makes them both arousing and appropriately violent. The plot has a pensive, slow build towards Josie's revelation, but the end is almost comically brief. In sum, the book is defined by the fact that the conflict falters and dies: the problems are not as severe as they need to be and their resolution is far too swift, and so Josie's concerns appear foolish and small. Abrams tries to write about psychology and sex, about what drives one woman to punish herself, what makes her find such punishment both comforting and arousing. The text, however, is a mere shadow of its intentions: a minor psychological issue, an easily forgotten childhood trauma, a simple and swift resolution all of which make the book disappointing and forgettable. Interested readers would be better to borrow than buy this book, since it holds little reread potential. Personally, I do not recommend it. In its place, I do recommend *The Story of O*—another book about the psychology of submission that is in much the same vein but manages to be both intensely erotic and intelligently psychological—and similar texts.

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### **Jessica~CoinOperatedJoy says**

At times I found myself not really invested in Josie. I didn't like her very much and I didn't like some of the things she did but when I finished the last sentence of the book I realized that wasn't the point. Although there are pieces to the story I still don't quite understand the overall message is clear. It's a story of self discovery and acceptance. The writer's descriptions are some of the most original I have read in a long while and were refreshing to read but there were a great many times when the descriptions were a bit too much and I found myself skimming through them. Overall, I liked it and I really liked Devesh.

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### **Christal says**

I read this book in one (long) day of airline travel. I would like to recommend it to my book club and see my various friend's reactions to it.

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### **Lori Whitwam says**

I probably need a shelf labeled "erotica," but until I do, "popular fiction" will have to suffice.

I'm just not having any luck finding erotica that is what I was looking for (wow, badly constructed sentence!). Yes, this has a strong erotic tone, with the character learning to surrender herself to "discipline." What I was looking for, though, was a deeply erotic story, as far from the Harlequin-esque stuff I've been finding... and this was that... but it was ultimately more about the character's deep psychological disturbance,

which began in childhood.

The writing was thoughtful and original, and I enjoyed reading it. It's not the author's fault it wasn't what I wanted.

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### **Paul says**

erotic and very well written. worth the read.

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### **Janet says**

Written by my good friend Melanie, this novel is waaay too steamy and sexual and S&M for little ole me. (I have issues.)

But the manuscript was lying on her dining room table in the middle of being proofread when I happened to walk past. The page I read was haunting and beautiful.

An intense love story - complete with themes of power and control.

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### **Padmin says**

Dice: Se ti piacciono tanto McEwan e le sue storie torbide, leggi questa "opera prima" della Melanie. Bene, la prima e l'ultima, per me.

Mi ci sono quasi addormentata e sono arrivata alla fine solo perché volevo verificare una certa ipotesi.

Avevo in buona sostanza individuato il problema della Josie, la protagonista, e mi mancava solo di acclararlo nero su bianco.

Era facile e non mi piacciono i problemi facili.

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### **Kate says**

An amazing book. The premise (and the cover) are a touch on the racy side. But the novel explores pain, grief, and ultimately, forgiveness. Beautifully written. A troubled and at times unlikable heroine. A dark tale with a surprisingly uplifting conclusion.

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### **Cassandra says**

I was debating between a three and a four star. Now, I wasn't exactly expecting smut, but I was expecting a tiny bit more. The writing was good. Ms. Abrams has talent, that's for sure. But at times I felt like the story

was kind of all over the place. I got where she was going with things, but sometimes it didn't seem necessary. I thought there were parts that could have been more developed and others that were way over developed. I was also slightly disappointed at the constant shame that Josie felt over her submissive desires. I realize that it is a common idea about the lifestyle, but I was disappointed to see her go this way with it. But, I was glad that she resolved it the way that she did. It did redeem itself in the end, but there was a while there in the middle that I was very angry with. But I guess that is because as a sub myself, I don't feel, and have never felt any shame about my sexual preferences.

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### **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

Here's one that took me at least two years to finish. It's the debut novel of Melanie Abrams, a university lecturer whose husband, Vikram Chandra, is far more well-known. It's about a young woman, Josie, who is independently wealthy thanks to her parents, but who takes a job as a live-in nanny for a doctor and single mum, Mary. Mary has a young son, Tyler, who's slightly autistic or with a touch of Asperger's - he likes to count and measure everything; and a baby girl, Madeline.

Then Josie meets a doctor and Mary's colleague, Devesh, a handsome Indian man who likes sexual play, and all Josie's repressed guilt over her baby brother's death when she was just a child, and her neuroses come to the fore.

First of all, this novel was incredibly predictable, painfully so. Secondly, it was dull. Thirdly, oh my god Josie was unbearable. She is insufferable. She has so much angst, and has to over-think everything and agonise over it and indulge herself in her own pettiness. I had no patience for her whatsoever. I got maybe halfway and put the book down for two years; when I picked it up again (determined to finish what I'd started), I could remember it all quite well. I skimmed through the rest, reading sections here and there, and it was like I'd already read it, it was so predictable. Her problems with her parents, the guilt Josie carries, why she can't separate Devesh's "play" from true punishment for some past crime - I just didn't care about her, and the themes of the novel (which attempts to explore the psychological side of sexual playing) is obvious and not at all enlightening.

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### **V says**

I was pleasantly surprised to note that Abrams' writing is great - as in, she really knows how to string a sentence together. I was really sucked into the writing of the piece, and how effortless it felt. Unfortunately, I wasn't that thrilled by the rest of the piece. I found Josie's character to be rather shallow, and I thought that the way in which she was plagued by her feelings about the unconventional sexual intimacy she found herself taking part in read as unrealistic and uncomplicated.

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### **Janet W. says**

This book reminds me of *Addicted by Zane*....starts off strong and then it just falls flat. There needs to be more character development for Devesh. I felt that he could have been more enigmatic and the only thing that we do know about him is that he's Indian and his sexual preference. Josie needs more development as

well. I wasn't sure if the author was trying to use stream of conscienceness in her writing for that character...it was somewhat confusing.

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### **Amy says**

I wish this book had been better, because clearly, the author is talented. But the plot...ick. Cliched, and frankly, I felt like she was really trying to link S&M with abuse, which squicks me out majorly. Characters needed to be way more developed, and frankly, not being quite so into Josie's head would have gone a long way towards making the story much more compelling.

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### **Cynthia says**

I read this semi-trashy novel because a review in *Bitch* said some nice things about it. Sadly, *Bitch* steered me wrong. Although I wasn't expecting full-out porn, there's more fizzle than sizzle in terms of the sex. The main character experiences a lot of angst about her interest in BDSM, which I get, but she's also quite immature. She spends a lot of the novel saying, "We've got to stop doing this" and "I have to go." I kept wanting to smack her (which she'd be fine with) and say, "You've got your hot Indian daddy! Quit running away from him!"

The narrator ALSO--disturbingly--relates her interest in BDSM (she's a bottom, fyi) to her desire to abuse the kids she nannies for. That is a peculiar and unpleasant logic: because she's O in bed, she's Joan Crawford on the job? WTF?

On the upside, the book does include some interesting backstory on Josie's relationship with her family, and some fascinating insights into Indian culture. However, I mostly just wanted Josie to go home and get off, and quit whining about, running from, and pathologizing her desires.

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