

FEATURE NAME



# An audience with the chief whip

Catherine Robbe-Grillet became France's most famous dominatrix — her exploits make *Fifty Shades of Grey* seem tame. Now 85, she's still the grande dame of the boudoir. Interview by *Toni Bentley*

I am going to meet the most famous dominatrix in France. It is late afternoon on a grey day as the taxi drives from Paris through the lush green fields of Normandy. The address I have been given is so abbreviated as to be comical: no numbers, no street, no postal code, just the name of the château and the province in which it resides. The GPS is having none of it.

The driver finds the obscure turnoff beyond which lies a Louis XIV fairy tale: an enormous horseshoe drive circles a field dotted with an ocean of buttercups and, at its turn, the 17th-century Château du Mesnil-au-Grain perched in full glory. The black car drops me off. At the entrance I am greeted by a tiny lady wearing a white scarf wrapped stylishly about her head, slim white cotton trousers and blouse, and a fluffy, sage-green mohair cardigan.

Catherine Robbe-Grillet is the 85-year-old widow of Alain Robbe-Grillet, theoretician, novelist, film-maker, avowed sadist, member of the Académie Française, and “pope” of the avant-garde literary movement known as the nouveau roman.

The young Robbe-Grillet bought the château in 1963, making them only its fifth owners since its construction, around 1680, and the first without aristocratic lineage.

“*Bienvenue*,” Madame Robbe-Grillet says to me. (She does not speak English.) “*Un petit château pour une petite dame!*” (A little château for a little lady!) As she says this, she dips girlishly in a small curtsy, a charming, and disarming, gesture. The power she wields, standing at a majestic 4ft 11in and weighing in at 88lb (she has worn children’s clothing her entire adult life), is concealed behind the most courteous carapace of the sweetest little old lady one might ever meet.

Having read her 1985 book, *Cérémonies de Femmes* (Women’s Rites), I knew this woman was a modern-day Marquise de Sade, and had, over the past four decades, pierced and cut some of her submissives with hatpins, crowned them with thorns, chained them to walls, and overall beaten the shit out of a large number of men and women.

Just behind her is Beverly Charpentier, the woman Madame has lived with — rather notoriously — since Robbe-Grillet’s death in 2008. She is a very pretty and vivacious 52-year-old, with green eyes and blonde hair. She is elegantly dressed in a long gold lamé skirt and collared blouse. Her fingernails are red. Madame likes them red.

Beverly has lit a towering inferno in the fireplace, and the hem of her skirt is singed. She is a Cinderella to be reckoned with, not least because her prince turned out to be a woman. “There is an awful lot out there about us that is wildly inaccurate,” she says. “They talk about me as Catherine’s ‘sexual slave’. When I imagine an older woman and a younger woman and the term “sexual slave”, the pictures conjured in my mind are grotesque. Like her dressed in leather and boots, and me, chained, dangling from the rafters. She roars with laughter while I wonder just what exactly does go on between them.

“Catherine is my secret garden,” she says quietly when I inquire about their intimacy. “I have given myself to her, body and soul. She does whatever she wants, whenever she wants, with either or both, according to her pleasure. And her pleasure is my pleasure.” When I ask what she will do when Catherine dies, she starts to cry.

Beverly met Catherine more than 20 years ago in Mexico. Beverly was married to a French diplomat who was hosting an evening in honour of Alain Robbe-Grillet. (Beverly remained married until her husband’s death in 2013, and he visited the château regularly with their two children.)

“I saw this tiny woman standing alone in a corner holding a glass of water while the great man was being fêted, so I introduced myself,” Beverly says. “From the moment I met her, I was obsessed with her. I wanted to be with her.”

Their acquaintance continued when Beverly and her family relocated to Paris. Had women ever featured in her fantasies? “Never. Never. And they don’t now, either.”

After many years of friendship, Beverly told Catherine that she wanted to participate in her “ceremonies” — as Madame calls her sadomasochistic stagings. Then, one night during a ceremony, everything changed. “I watched as she put her hand around the back of a submissive’s neck, and I realised in that moment I wanted that to be my neck.”

A few days later she wrote a letter to Catherine dated May 5, 2005. It is her oath of allegiance:

“Madame, you have asked nothing of me; it is, therefore, of my own free will that I offer to you allegiance, obedience and loyalty. I swear to serve you faithfully in all things great and small, to obey your orders, carry out your wishes, whatever they may be. I commend to you everything I possess, material, intellectual and physical that you may dispose of what I have as you see fit. I swear to dedicate myself to you.”

Catherine suggested they have tea a few days later — and so it has been, as in Beverly’s pledge, for almost 10 years.

A paradoxical portrait emerges. Beverly is a heterosexual, dominatrix of men, submissive only to one person — who is a woman. “Is your driving desire to please Catherine?” I ask. She doesn’t miss a beat: “Absolutely. Yes.”

I ask if Madame feels the same way toward her. “Oh, no, she doesn’t!” she replies. “She’s never felt that for anyone. She loved her parents, her sisters, and her husband. And me. But what we call ‘being in love’, that loss of control where you can’t imagine life without the other person, she has never felt that.”

The ladies live their daily life in civilised busyness and perfect equanimity. They have never had a conflict: “Catherine decides everything,” explains Beverly, smiling, “so there can never, ever, be any disagreement between us, because Catherine is right even if she is wrong!”

In both Paris and Normandy they live in their separate abodes and have breakfast and lunch apart, as Catherine does not appear in company before 2pm. The shelves in the libraries of their residences are overflowing with books, and they have an inordinately busy social life in Paris, attending gallery openings, films, cocktail parties, and the theatre frequently — both trained and worked as professional actresses. Last year they toured China together performing the Marguerite Duras play Savannah Bay. A documentary about Robbe-Grillet and her circle was released.

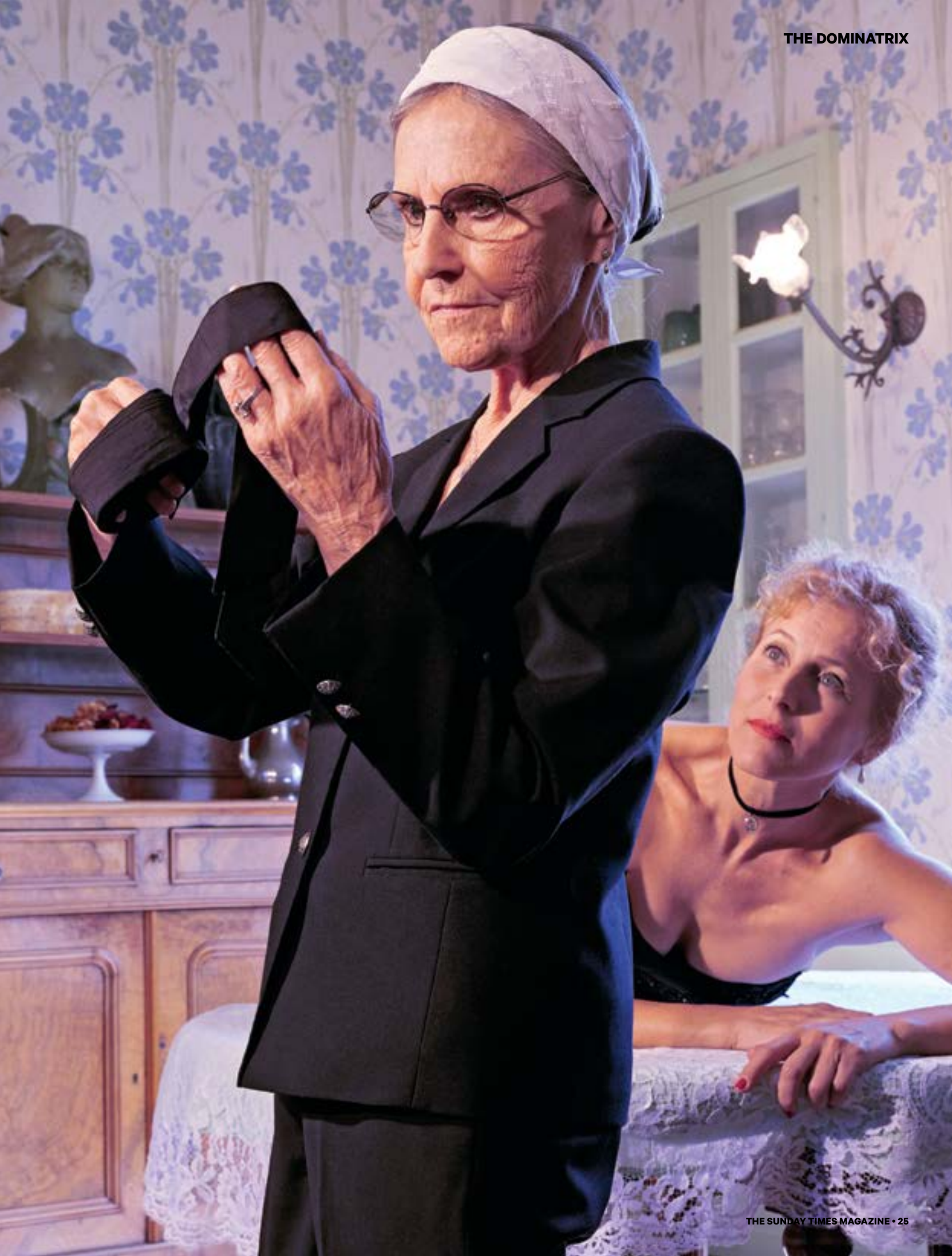
Beverly pledged her life to Catherine three years before Alain died at the age of 85. He and Beverly were good friends and he was glad to know that Beverly would take care of Catherine after he died. The bad boy of French intellectuals still overlooks the ladies’ proceedings from the black-blue urn where his ashes reside on a shelf in the château’s dining room.

Just below the urn lies a tightly braided length of soft brown leather; a silver snap hook shines at the thick end, while the single tail has a well-worn 3in cracker. This beautiful weapon is the Robbe-Grillet “marital whip”. Catherine bought it as a gift for Alain, as “a symbol of my submission,” in 1954. It is the only whip, she says, he ever used on her: “It is my whole life.” ➤➤➤

**“Catherine is my secret garden. I have given myself to her, body and soul. She does whatever she wants, according to her pleasure. And her pleasure is my pleasure”**

**THIS WON’T HURT A BIT**  
**Right: Madame Catherine Robbe-Grillet prepares a ribbon for her next ceremony, watched by her long-term companion, Beverly Charpentier, who lives on the Normandy estate with her**

**Previous pages: Beverly adorned in pearls, with the initials “JDB” sealed on her chest. They stand for “Jeanne de Berg” — Catherine’s sadomasochistic nom de plume**





**EYES WIDE SHUT**  
A young  
submissive  
in Istanbul,  
participating  
in a ceremony  
called “Le  
Dîner Noir”

In 61 years, it has never been out of use.

“I grew up in a world of women,” says Catherine, “my sisters, my mother, my grandmother, and the nuns.”

Born Catherine Rstakian in Paris in 1930, she was the eldest of four sisters. Her Armenian father worked in insurance but was absent for much of her childhood, ensconced in a sanatorium with tuberculosis. She attended a strict, all-girls Catholic school.

A perfect student, courteous and honest, Catherine was always top of her class. But even then she followed directions with a perceptible superiority. “It drove the nuns crazy,” she says, “but they couldn’t do anything about it. I was called ‘The Sneering Student’. I was irritated at being preached to. Even now, any kind of moralising annoys me. Instinctively, I argue the opposite to whatever is conventional.”

To this day she remains an ascetic: she doesn’t drink or smoke, hardly eats, and is moderate in all things but one.

She lost her virginity at 18: “It hurt, and I thought, ‘If this is making love, it doesn’t interest me.’” Intercourse interested her even less after she endured a horrific, illegal, backstreet abortion in 1950, just prior to meeting her future husband.

She met Alain on a train to Istanbul when she was 21. He was eight years older than her, an agronomical engineer with wild, unruly hair, no money, and living in an attic room above his parents’ Paris apartment. He was obsessed with writing and is perhaps best remembered as the writer of the 1961 masterpiece *Last Year at Marienbad*.

Catherine, who embodied Robbe-Grillet’s lifelong obsession with young girls, says their affair was strange from the start. “He was a man of great control. I knew what turned him on: it was cruelty.” Open and curious, she willingly became his submissive.

In 1956, 25-year-old Catherine, under the male nom de plume Jean de Berg, published a scandalous novel titled *L’Image* (The Image), about the escalating sadomasochistic encounters between Claire, a dominant, attractive career woman; Anne, her beautiful slave girl; and Jean, a handsome male acquaintance. The book uncannily foretold Catherine’s own switch — 17 years later, from submissive to

dominant. It was banned upon publication.

The police arrived at the office of the publisher Jérôme Lindon, demanding to know who was this “Jean de Berg”? “I have no idea,” lied Lindon, as he handed over copies of the book, which were burnt. However, he continued publishing the book.

By 1957, Alain had published three books to considerable, and controversial, acclaim, and Catherine finally agreed to marry him. On their wedding night she discovered the full extent of his off-the-radar sexuality: “He had no problem with getting erections, but not for penetration. So Freudian!” she says. And “he immediately gave me my freedom,” and so began her happy 50-year marriage, taking numerous other lovers, male and female — “I was always bisexual,” she says. But Alain remained her only master.

A year later, he directed her to a small five-page scroll tied with a red ribbon he had left in a secret compartment of her writing bureau. There she found his handwritten document “*Contrat de Prostitution Conjugale*” (Contract for Conjugal Prostitution), which outlines exactly what he required for their sadomasochistic sessions.

“Her presence being solely to gratify the husband’s vices, he shall treat her accordingly, with relentless harshness and brutality.” Robbe-Grillet’s “vices” make the infamous Christian Grey’s demands look downright feeble.

On the appointed day, at precisely the designated time, his wife shall present herself at the rendezvous, dressed strictly according to instructions... she shall kneel immediately before her husband, eyes lowered, hands behind her back... These postures will nearly always be humiliating. They may be accompanied by chains or any manner of restraint.

For each session, Catherine was to be compensated 20,000 francs (roughly £280 in today’s money). Catherine never signed this contract, though they continued their sessions much as outlined in the document. In her recent biographical book, Alain, she writes that while finding the Sadean theatre along with the offer of being remunerated “rather agreeable,” she was disappointed in an imperfect master who deigned to offer “mercy” to his “victim”. When

asked about “Fifty Shades of Grey” she smiles: “If she [Anastasia Steele] were mine I wouldn’t have her.”

And so we arrive at the heart of the matter: Robbe-Grillet’s “little girl” wife was, it appears, a dominant from the start, from her sneers at the nuns, at Catholicism, at convention, from her simultaneous lovers, and now here with her grand seigneur.

Aged 43, Catherine had a revelation while with a young lover who had become her second master. One night, in 1973, he ordered her to dominate him, and so she obeyed. She liked it. Very much. “I suddenly realised I felt like doing what I wanted to do. I wanted to decide for myself,” she says, “I became dominant.” And she had learnt how, for more than 20 years, at the other end of the whip, from a master. Who, I ask, is the submissive in a relationship: her answer cuts to the quick. “The one who needs the most.”

In the past four decades since, she has acquired a certain renown in France, much coming from the publication of *Cérémonies de Femmes*. The book details, often graphically, some of the ceremonies she has conducted over the years, including one that went terribly wrong — a submissive inadvertently moved at an inopportune time — and ended with a fountain of blood in the emergency room. Since then she rarely uses knives. Catherine, it must be noted, is not a “professional” dominatrix and has never accepted money: “If someone pays, they are in charge. I need to remain free.”

The ceremonies usually take place in the company of Madame’s petit clan of dominatrices. There are currently six women in the group. “We are a tribe, all equal,” says Beverly. “But Catherine is not equal to anyone. Everyone bows to Catherine. She is law.”

The ladies all live in Paris and have known each other for many years, some for decades. “We have this unusual thing in common,” says Beverly, “a sexual deviance, this desire to dominate men.” “But,” she adds, “we are not sadists. Real sadism is non-consenting but we share an enormous mutual gratification with those who come to us.”

The ceremonies are scripted and directed by Catherine. Madame’s *chambre secrète* can be anywhere she chooses — the lowest *quai* of the Seine at midnight (a whipping lit by the lights of passing boats), or, for *La Chasse* (The Hunt), a private Parisian park at dusk (where the *petit* clan indulged one young woman’s fantasy, chasing her down and tying her up.)

More recently, she staged *Le Soir de DSK* (The Evening of DSK). The evening took place in four scenes set in a hotel bedroom: a man rapes a chambermaid, a man has consensual sex with a chambermaid, a woman rapes a bellboy, and a woman has consensual sex with a bellboy. I ask Madame which of the four scenarios worked best. Her blue eyes twinkle. “Well, the woman who played the hotel guest was very convincing.”

Ceremonies can be as simple as an elaborate dinner, which includes men worshipping the ladies under the table, or a butler — a British publisher — receiving a caning for a service infraction. But more serious ceremonies only take place with Madame’s “fidèles”, a small circle of men she has known for years with whom the trust is absolute. There are no tourists in Madame’s dungeon.

As I say goodbye to Madame, I am cued by Beverly, and drop to my knees before her and offer my thanks for her time and indulgence with my endless questions. She looks down at me sweetly, her delicate hands loosely interlaced before her like an expectant child. As I rise to leave she lands a swift, almost imperceptible, tug on my hair ■

#### The pleasure and the pain

See a trailer of the hotly anticipated *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie — released on February 13 — on tablet, or at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/fiftyshades](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/fiftyshades)

## Black chiffon and blindfolds

Toni Bentley asked Catherine if she could observe one of her ceremonies. She was told there are “no observers, only participants”

As I step out of the elevator, Beverly, transformed in a plunging, tightly laced corset, silk harem pants, and boots, opens a door and yanks me inside. Without a word, she blindfolds me with a black silk band and leads me forward: “Left,” “right,” “step up,” “step down.” I am disoriented. We stop and I hear the angelic chorus of Allegri’s prayer for redemption, *Miserere mei, Deus* (Have mercy on me, O God.)

To one side of a magnificent room stands Christian, a beautiful, Byronic man with a great mane of wavy black hair who has been one of Madame’s *fidèles* for more than 25 years.

Among the brocade divans, velvet armchairs and books sits a 19th-century prayer stool, a crucifix carved into its tall back. Standing beside this altar is Madame, dressed entirely in black: knee-high boots, belted dress, and turban with silver threading.

Catherine, an atheist, practises a theatre of secular High Church sadomasochism, and her ceremonies are informed by the sacraments, the music, the language, and the props of her Catholic girlhood. They are sacrificial rituals of devotion.

I am undressed and prepared. I am mesmerised, no longer reporting a story, but inside one. My body is mummified in yards of black chiffon, secured around my neck, chest and waist with a long string of pearls tied at the back. My hair is pinned back.

I am laid down on a carpet and tied at each wrist and ankle with chord. I sense hands above my body and hear the cutting of the chiffon layers down the centre of my body. The silk is peeled back, leaving me exposed. I get an occasional flash of light through the bottom of the blindfold and see Christian in his suit kneeling between my legs, gently caressing my belly. At my head Madame sits on a small stool

“Crack! The whip — the famed ‘marital whip’ — lands on my back and curls around me. Does it hurt? Like hell”

administering to my upper body with small unidentifiable instruments. It is mysterious and beyond exciting to be the focus of such a carefully, beautifully, executed ritual. To be in the hands, literally, of a Master Mistress.

I am untied and lifted to my knees by Christian, and Madame steps in and cradles me in her arms. I am weeping, so deep is this experience. Unprecedented. But it is not over. I am placed on the prayer stool, head bowed. All is quiet and calm.

Crack! The whip — the famed “marital whip” — lands on my back and curls its leather braid around my entire belly. I make a sound I never made before. Not a scream, but something on a far lower register. A short pause and the air crackles again with another lash. Does it hurt? Like hell. The heaven I have waited for all my life.

And so it was that I was awakened by these two extraordinary women from the great sleep that envelopes so many women mired in the abyss of ambivalence about men and I felt myself more deeply than ever before.

Never have I experienced such trust and see now so clearly that trust is not merely a necessary component to investigating erotic depths, but is eroticism itself. After this initiation my soul desire was to revisit this matriarchal world where women, at long last, wield the whip. I had much to learn from such tenderness. Two months later I returned to the château ■