

The Twilight Series

By Marilyn Stewart

INTRODUCTION

When the book *Twilight* broke onto the literary scene in 2005, author Stephenie Meyer, teenage heroine Bella, and vampire boyfriend Edward became overnight sensations. The teen love story turned box office hit is part of a growing sub-genre of romance literature that is transforming the vampire's image from the centuries-old creature of evil into a poetic tragic hero.

Meyer, a Latter-day Saint (Mormon) housewife and mother, was inspired by a dream she experienced in June 2003 in which a sparkly, fair-skinned vampire sat and talked with his human girlfriend in a grassy meadow. The author's website says this: "Within weeks of its release [*Twilight*] debuted at #5 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Among its many accolades, *Twilight* was named an 'ALA Top Ten Books for Young Adults,' an Amazon.com "Best Book of the Decade...So Far", and a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year."¹ From that start, the first-time author and graduate of Brigham Young University produced three more books in the highly successful series: *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*. The series became an international phenomenon with printings in twenty languages and has attracted a new generation of vampire-enthusiasts.

The *Twilight* movie, starring Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, debuted at #1 in its opening weekend in November 2008.² This year's blockbuster movie, *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*, the series' third film release, grossed nearly 300 million dollars in box office revenues. The movies draw a predominantly female audience, from young teens to adult women.³ Meyer's first science fiction novel, *The Host*, was released in 2008, just months before *Breaking Dawn*. Meyer and her husband and three sons live in Arizona.⁴

The Twilight phenomenon has rivaled the highly successful Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling and has left schools and parents wondering about the obsession it has generated, particularly in young fans. The American Library Association listed the series as one of the Most Frequently Challenged Books of 2009 for the following complaints: "sexually explicit, religious viewpoint, unsuited to age group."⁵ Australian primary schools banned the books, and the blogosphere carried word of bans in some Utah schools.⁶

Critics point out the series' less-than-stellar writing style,⁷ and the titillating sexual tension that was substituted for pre-marital sex. Religious concerns have been raised over the use of vampires and supernaturalism in a story that attracts young fans, while others note the coloring of the plot and characters by the author's Mormon worldview. Because film and pop literature are powerful forces in shaping belief in today's secular culture, an overview of the complaints made against *Twilight* are presented here. Parents may make their own judgments regarding this popular series and its appropriateness for their children.

Plot Synopses⁸

Twilight: Seventeen-year-old Bella Swan moves from Arizona to Forks, Washington to live with her father when her mother remarries. She falls in love with the handsome and moody Edward Cullen and soon discovers he and his family are "vegetarian" vampires who abstain from human blood. Bella pleads with Edward to change her into a vampire so they can be together "forever," but he refuses. Though the Cullen family finds Bella's scent intoxicating, they are determined to protect her. The Cullens kill James, a tracker vampire who had followed Bella's scent.

New Moon: Bella's cut finger at her eighteenth birthday party sends Edward's brother into a vampiric frenzy. For Bella's safety, Edward decides his family must leave Forks and he vows

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never to see her again. Despondent, Bella turns to Jacob, a “shape-shifter,” or werewolf, and a love triangle develops. Bella’s behavior turns reckless so Edward will “appear” and save her. Believing Bella has died, Edward asks the Volturi, the Italian ruling body of vampires, to take his life. Bella’s sudden appearance at the council angers the Volturi, but they agree to spare her if she is changed into a vampire. Edward proposes.

Eclipse: Edward and Jacob join forces to protect Bella from a ruthless band of vampires out to avenge James’ death. Edward’s sister Rosalie reveals that her hatred of Bella is, in actuality, intense envy of Bella’s mortal capacity of bearing children. Edward kills Victoria, the girlfriend of James, and Bella tells him she can only be happy in “his” world. They become engaged.

Breaking Dawn: Two weeks after Bella and Edward wed, they discover she is pregnant. The rapidly developing half-vampire baby threatens Bella’s life. Edward saves Bella by finally changing her into a vampire. The Volturi fear the half-breed child will expose them and vow to kill the young family. Witnesses gather to testify on Edward and Bella’s behalf. The Volturi are dissuaded from killing them when a half human/half vampire aborigine is presented and shown to be harmless. The story ends with Bella happy as a wife, mother, and homemaker.

HISTORY

Vampire lore has thrilled readers since the early eighteenth century and originated, definitively, in Eastern European folklore. The stories have been adapted for all audiences with vampires taking the form of everything from the erotic to the family-friendly Count von Count of *Sesame Street*. The advent of the modern vampire romance novel has accelerated the evolution of the vampire from repulsive creature into a romantic figure.⁹ Early works, such as *The Bride of Corinth* (1797), portray sharp conflict between paganism and Christianity. English writer James Malcolm Rymer introduced fangs, “hypnotic powers, and superhuman strength” to the fictional characters in his *Varney the Vampire* (1847).¹⁰

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) set the industry standard for vampires in literature and film. Stoker’s vampire-fighting hero Abraham Van Helsing and the story’s mix of sex, blood, and death were popular in Victorian England. In *Dracula*, evil vampires battle Christianity and are beaten back by crosses, crucifixes, and garlic. Only decapitation, drowning, or a wooden stake through the heart brings death. Stoker’s vampires have no reflection in mirrors and are merely weakened by sunlight; the early film industry made sunlight fatal to the creatures.¹¹

I Am Legend (1954) by Richard Matheson introduced science fiction to the vampire genre and offered a medical explanation – a rampant disease that causes vampirism and brings apocalypse – for a human’s conversion to a living corpse. The book, often called the first modern vampire novel, was remade as a film multiple times, including, “The Omega Man” (1971) and the 2007 blockbuster film “I Am Legend,” that substituted zombie-like creatures for the classic vampire.¹²

Perhaps no author has been more significant in integrating romance and sexuality into the contemporary vampire narrative than Anne Rice, with her multi-volume *Vampire Chronicles*. Rice remade vampires from “intrinsically evil” to “romantic anti-heroes caught in a poetic and tragic web.”¹³ Charlaine Harris followed with the series, *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. Vampire mania continues as works such as the CW Television Network’s “The Vampire Diaries” enters a new season this year.

Content

Meyer took the crossover from evil to romantic figure a step further with her vampire-turned-good-guys coven that protects the teen heroine against the murderous “bad” vampires. Though Meyer’s sparkly vampires abstain from human blood, alcohol, and premarital sex, the series is not entirely *sparkling* clean.

Camille Turpin, a Mormon and a self-described fan turned “Twi-hater,” said: “I could write all day about the things I didn’t like – it was poorly written to say the least...” Turpin complains that though Bella and Edward wait until marriage for sex, Edward spends countless nights in her room: “...it introduces girls and women of every age to edge-of-the-cliff sexual ‘morality’ and unhealthy, extreme, and twisted ideas about sex, marriage and motherhood.”¹⁴

Bella’s obsession for Edward, to the exclusion of all other relationships and interests, and Edward’s controlling behavior, are noted by some as marks of unhealthy, even abusive, behavior. Edward reminds Bella it is a *physical* trait – the scent of her blood – that he finds

overpowering. Edward manipulates, follows and “watches over” Bella, and when he leaves in the second book, he tells her it is for “her own good.” The “average girl” Bella is willing to give up anything, including her soul, to be with the exceptionally handsome Edward.¹⁵

Religious Imagery

Some critics say Meyer borrowed from her Mormon faith. A tongue-in-cheek web page produced by an anonymous author with LDS roots described Edward as “the perfect Mormon boy,” fashioned after LDS founder Joseph Smith. “[Meyer] was drawing from everything we Mormons were taught about Good Ol’ Joe – he was handsome, shockingly so, he could draw you in with just his presence.” The writer said Meyer’s constant reminders of Edward’s perfection echo the expectation for LDS families “that is the drum beat in the Mormon church.”¹⁶ John Granger, author and critic of the Harry Potter series, said Meyer’s books add a new twist: “*Twilight* is essentially an allegory of one gentile seeker’s coming to the fullness of Latter-day Saint faith and life.”¹⁷

Actor Robert Pattinson, who plays Edward on screen, dismissed any Mormon influence, saying, “Even Stephenie said it doesn’t mean any of that.”¹⁸ Jana Riess, a Mormon who is a “well-known figure in the religious publishing world” and author of “six books on spirituality in America”¹⁹ disagreed. Riess cited an article by Religion News Service writer Angela Aleiss that noted these connections to LDS doctrine: 1) “A crucial Mormon belief is that humans can become divine.” The vampire family lives without death in a resurrected condition. Edward is repeatedly called “godlike” and “inhumanly beautiful.” 2) “Mormons believe angels are resurrected beings of flesh and bone.” Bella describes Edward as an angel glorious beyond description: his skin sparkles in sunlight. 3) “Marriages are ‘sealed’ for eternity; spouses are... eternal companions.”²⁰ Bella speaks repeatedly of her “forever” relationship with Edward.²¹

The Salt Lake Tribune carried Aleiss’ article but omitted the final two points. Riess included this partial quote: “The *Book of Mormon* teaches that a remnant of these ancient people came to America around 600 B.C.; their descendents, the Lamanites, are among the ancestors of the Native Americans. Quileute names in the series are decidedly Hebrew...”²² Riess stopped short of including: “Jacob’s last name is Black, a reference to the Lamanites’ ‘skin of blackness.’”²³ Riess also omitted Aleiss’ point that Jacob’s claim on the infant child of Bella and Edward as his future bride would produce a genetic link to the vampire family, similar to Mormons’ belief that “they share a common heritage with Native Americans through ancient Israel.”²⁴

Granger wrote that the re-telling of the biblical account of the Garden of Eden is the book’s most powerful allegorical theme: “Here, the Fall is a good thing, even the key to salvation and divinization, just as Joseph Smith... said it was.”²⁵

Bella loves Edward, the forbidden fruit of a human-vampire affair. Edward “saves” Bella at the end by changing her into a vampire and thereby granting her happiness, fulfillment, and immortality alongside her husband. Granger said, “Celestial marriage is a core ordinance for Mormon exaltation (salvation), and without the ‘Fall,’ man could not take this important step in his progression from mortality to post-mortal life as a god in the Celestial Kingdom.” He reminds readers that Bella’s marriage to Edward was “a necessary condition for his making her a vampire.”²⁶

Granger argues another point and says that Meyer “reverses” damaging evidence against Mormonism and incorporated the reversals into her story. Granger points out the dream that inspired the series coincided with the publication of three books on the 1857 Mountain Meadow Massacre in which Mormons attacked and killed 120 non-Mormons traveling through Utah. The book’s most significant scenes also take place in a mountain meadow, Granger points out, including the final showdown with the Volturi, the Italian ruling class of vampires.

In that scene, the Volturi are persuaded to spare Bella and Edward’s child when supporters produce a harmless, 150 year-old aborigine with a similar genetic blueprint. Granger links this last minute appearance of the aborigine to LDS anthropologist Thomas W. Murphy’s public assertion that genetics had disproved the Book of Mormon’s claim that Native Americans are descendants of Jews in America.²⁷ Granger claims Meyer is saying, in effect, “Genetics isn’t the enemy; it’s the savior.”²⁸

Whatever the reader’s decision about Mormon themes in *Twilight*, Riess and Aleiss conclude the connections are probably unintentional and may be the natural infusion of a writer’s worldview into her work. Riess admits a reflection of Mormon culture in Meyer’s

writings: “Fans sit enraptured as Bella continues her quest to be part of an ideal LDS family that mates for eternity, has regular Family Home Evenings, and is headed up by a benevolent patriarch and a gentle homemaker.” She addresses Pattinson directly, in saying, “But cheer up. Your character gets to live forever and reproduce even in your post life –another peculiarly LDS doctrine. Weird, yes... but definitely Mormon.”²⁹

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE³⁰

The *Twilight* books and films are popular, Granger believes, because they meet a spiritual need: “When God is driven to the periphery of the public square, the human spiritual capacity longs for exercise...” Films and literature such as *Twilight* exercise our imaginations and suspend “disbelief.” Thoughtful Christians should be aware of narrative’s power to inform belief.

Fans wanting more of Meyer’s version of vampire lore may find literature and internet offerings that are not as wholesome. Caution should be exercised in exploring the genre (1 Pet. 5:8). Fantasy literature by Christian authors such as C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien provides powerful images of the Christian faith and opportunities to engage the culture in conversation. In sharing, Christians can be confident that the biblical Gospel satisfies the deepest intellectual, spiritual, and emotional needs of mankind. (Eph. 4:14-21)

Christians must live out the faith in a way that shows a person has worth because she is loved and redeemed by God, and is not dependent on beauty, abilities, or involvement in any human relationship (1 Jn. 4:8-9). Believers must present healthy and realistic expectations for love and marriage, and homes built on Christ that edifies spouse and children.

Notes

- ¹ “Bio,” Stephanie Meyer, www.StephanieMeyer.com/bio.html (accessed September 1, 2010)
- ² Joal Ryan, “*Twilight* Sucks in Fanggirls for \$70.6 Mil Weekend,” *E Online*, November 23, 2008, http://www.eonline.com/uberblog/b70259_twilight_sucks_in_fanggirls_706_mil.html.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ www.StephanieMeyer.com/bio.html.
- ⁵ “Book on text messaging teens prompts most book challenges of 2009,” *American Library Association*, April 14, 2010. http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2010/april2010/mostchallenged2009_oif.cfm.
- ⁶ Lauren Dickson, “Schools ban racy *Twilight* books by Stephanie Meyer,” *The Daily Telegraph*, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/schools-ban-racy-twilight-books-by-stephanie-meyer/story-e6frewyr-1225772090737>. See also “Banning the *Twilight* Series?, *Just So*, <http://thesegolilypad.blogspot.com/2008/09/banning-twilight-series.html> (accessed September 1, 2010).
- ⁷ Kellen Rice, “*Twilight* Sucks...and not in a good way,” *Blast*, <http://psa.blastmagazine.com/2008/08/16/twilight-sucks-and-not-in-a-good-way/> (accessed September 5, 2010).
- ⁸ For a fuller synopsis for all these titles, see *The Internet Movie Database* at www.imdb.com/find?s=all&q=twilight (accessed September 1, 2010) and *Shmoop*, <http://www.shmoop.com/breaking-dawn/summary.html> (accessed September 1, 2010).
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- ¹⁰ Scott Laming, “A brief history of vampires in literature,” *AbeBooks.com*, www.abebooks.com/books/dracula-twilight-sookie-stackhouse/history-vampires-literature.shtml (accessed September 5, 2010).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Camille Turpin, “What’s broken about *Breaking Dawn*,” *goodreads.com*, <http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/54039-book-review-what-s-broken-about-breaking-dawn-part-one> (accessed October 25, 2010).
- ¹⁵ Graeme McMillan, “Official: *Twilight*’s Bella & Edward are in an abusive relationship,” *io9.com*, <http://io9.com/5413428/official-twilight-bella-edward-are-in-an-abusive-relationship> (accessed September 1, 2010).
- ¹⁶ Blog, <http://stoney321.livejournal.com/317176.html> (accessed September 2, 2010).
- ¹⁷ John Granger, “Mormon Vampires in the Garden of Eden,” *Touchstone*, Nov/Dec 2009, www.touchstonemag.com/archives/print.php?id=22-08-024-f (accessed September 1, 2010). Granger is the author of *How Harry Cast His Spell* (Salt River, 2008) and *The Deathly Hallows Lecture* (Zossima Press, 2008). His website is www.HogwartsProfessor.com.
- ¹⁸ Jana Riess, “Flunking Sainthood” *Beliefnet*, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/flunkingsainthood/2010/07/yes-robert-pattinson-there-are-mormon-themes-in-twilight.html> (accessed September 15, 2010).
- ¹⁹ “About the hosts,” *WJK Radio*, <http://wjkradio.wjkbooks.com/about-the-hosts.html>. Jana Riess, “Emorgent: Can a Mormon Be an Emergent Christian?,” *BeliefNet* August 30, 2010 <http://blog.beliefnet.com/flunkingsainthood/2010/08/emorgent-can-a-mormon-be-an-emergent-christian.html>.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Angela Aleiss, “Mormon influence, imagery runs deep through *Twilight*,” http://religionnews.com/index.php?rntext/mormon_influence_imagery_runs_deep_through_twilight (accessed September 5, 2010).
- ²² Riess.
- ²³ Aleiss. See 2 Nephi 5:21, 3 Nephi 2:14-15 (Book of Mormon). See *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (SLC: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:61.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Granger. See *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual* (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 20-21.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ See “DNA vs. The Book of Mormon,” a 2003 DVD production of Living Hope Ministries, 48 North Main Street, Brigham City, Utah. 84302. www.lhvm.org.
- ²⁸ Granger.
- ²⁹ Riess.
- ³⁰ For a response to Mormonism, see Watchman Profile by Tim Martin on “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Profile Notebook*, (Arlington, TX: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2010).



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