



# Once bitten: the fang bang fiction of Stephenie Meyer

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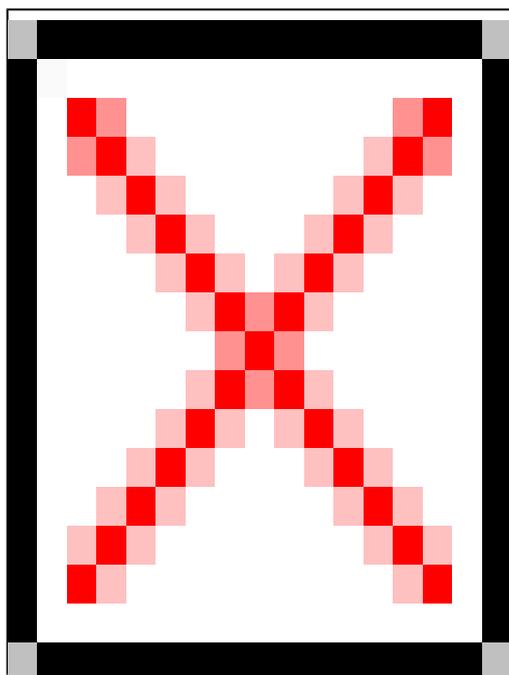
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**Nicholas Tucker** analyses the appeal of the vampire.



Over a century after Count Dracula rose from his grave in 1897, vampires are back in the news. US author's 'Twilight' series has become the greatest fictional phenomenon in the children's book world since Harry Potter, selling 85 million copies worldwide over the last three years. In Britain alone 10p in every pound spent on children's books during 2008 went on one of Meyer's titles. So has she received the same type of albeit guarded critical welcome formerly afforded to J K Rowling for keeping the reading flame burning so effectively among young readers? **Nicholas Tucker** explores.

The answer so far must largely be no. Despite evidence of a hugely enthusiastic readership stretching from the pre-teens up to student level and beyond, most British critics have found it impossible to warm to Meyer's novels. Reasons for this are not hard to find. While Rowling's style and subject matter derive from a long tradition of mainstream fantasy adventure stories written for children, Meyer's novels have more in common with the vapid American-based 'Point Horror' series popular 20 years ago. She too writes stories dripping with atmosphere but weak in characterisation. She too goes in for pages of witless boy-girl sparring more in the spirit of Noel Edmonds than Coward. She too writes sentences that any English teacher would have to score out, such as 'to take one of many examples' 'Did they know that I knew? Was I supposed to know that they knew that I knew, or not?' Her teenage hero Edward has a jaw that hardens under stress; he also has the ability to sit down fluidly. And Meyer often seems lacking in a sense of humour. 'No one was going to bite me,' says teenage heroine Isabella 'Bella' Swan to herself at the start of her story. How many of her readers must at that point have mouthed the words 'Says you!'

If fans don't go to Meyer for the quality of her prose, what is it that has captivated them? Ploughing through the over 2,000 pages that make up this quartet, it becomes increasingly obvious that Meyer does indeed offer something

immemorially powerful but usually missing from teenage fiction. She writes above all about the notion of overwhelming love coupled with the importance of maintaining hard-fought abstinence, a theme first taken up by medieval Troubadours and regularly repeated since until the arrival of our own more relaxed times. But to avoid looking hopelessly out of date, Meyer makes one crucial change to this ancient formula. She replaces descriptions of curiosity and longing for first sex with an account of longing and curiosity for a taste of blood, or in the case of Bella, a first experience of being tasted for her own blood. With this turn of plot, a writer who is also a signed-up Mormon can endlessly eroticise the male body while shifting the fictional balance from the difficulties of abstaining from sex to the necessity for Edward and Bella, for the purposes of their story, to abstain from experiencing each other's blood.

### **Edward, a dream hero**

To describe Edward Cullen, the object of Bella's adoration, as young is stretching a point, given that he is over 100 old. But he still looks eternally youthful, and don't we get to know about it. From the "smooth, white skin of his throat" to the "marbled contours" of his chest, Edward is a dream hero. No matter that the colour of his eyes varies from black, "ocher", golden, liquid topaz, onyx and "on one occasion when he clearly looked good enough to eat" butterscotch. What remains constant is his unearthly beauty, as Bella's awe-struck description of him taken from **Twilight**, the first novel in this series of four, makes clear:

"Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn't get used to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like (*sic*) thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal."

How very superior to most young men and would-be lovers in the Western world today! These real-life male teenagers may often have skin that still shows evidence of the latest eruption, piercing or tattoo, and their main interests may well be sport, drinking and as often as not any chance of quick and easy sex. By comparison, this "godlike creature" Edward is way above such earthly concerns, and very much at home with a girlfriend who likes the music of Debussy and the writings of Emily Brontë. In addition, orphan Edward has no trying parents to complicate the picture, demanding that he return home at a certain hour and keen that he keeps up with his schoolwork. He can therefore exist in a world of his own, untroubled by the absence of ready money, effortlessly clever in class and magnificently disdainful of everyone his own age outside his small, immediate family.

### **Attaining the unattainable**

Except, of course, for Bella. Loving and becoming the love object in return of someone quite so choosy ensures unmistakable status amongst her contemporaries. But Bella does not adore Edward for his looks alone, impressive though these are. She loves him for his own detached and quizzical self. Going for the seemingly unattainable and then attaining it is still the basic plot in most Mills & Boon romances, ostensibly aimed at older readers. Yet recent writing for teenagers has tended to play down the existence or even the possibility of perfect love between the sexes in favour of relationships high in snappy repartee but low in the language of true passion which is often slow to materialize. By bringing back an ideal of romantic passion at its most rarified Meyer has therefore filled something of a gap. And in an age where women in fact or fiction are expected to pull their own weight, Meyer also resurrects a compensatory dream of total female passivity. Bella herself does not come over as a normally passive character, but when Edward is around she is often in a state of permanent swoon. If modern life seldom or never allows the expression of such feelings among females, Meyer is on hand to provide for them in her fiction.

There could however be a problem for a nice, well brought up American girl swearing undying love to a vampire who is still actively hunting during the night. Meyer gets round this by making Edward one of the very few good vampires "selflessly protecting the rest of us from the excesses practised by the evil ones, even though he has all those bad feelings himself. So Bella also wants to comfort and nurture someone constantly at war with himself and only staying abstinent through a massive effort of will. He still snarls on occasions, moves at the speed of light and wants to drink human

blood. But he always manages to sublimate this last feeling, even when injecting Bella with his life-saving venom in **Breaking Dawn**, the last novel in the quartet. By this time, the chaste Bella, now aged 18, is safely married to Edward and has become a contented vampire herself. But there are plenty of emotional roller-coaster moments to come before the couple plus baby Renesmee are finally allowed to go home and live in peace, with the great love they bear each other still intact. The summoning of a special vampire court to oversee divorce proceedings at any time in the future seems not so much unlikely as heretically unthinkable.

### **The appeal of the vampire**

Psychoanalysts have had plenty to say about the appeal of vampire stories. For some, this return to the first oral stages of development takes readers back to an infantile state, when the baby both feeds off its mother while having occasional nightmare fantasies about the mother returning the compliment and starting to feed off them. For others, the state of erotic dependency that Bella falls into conjures up the helpless love an infant feels for a parent. In this scenario, fantasies of winning over a dominant but apparently out of reach lover is one aspect of any child's Oedipal feelings of wanting to possess one idealised parent to the exclusion of the other. Another school of thought believes that the vampire, male or female, is a metaphor for teenage girls as outsiders, struggling to cope with secret cravings that can sometimes seem very disturbing.

What does seem clear is that Meyer's stories (and their growing body of imitators) allow girl readers to experiment with strong feelings of submission and desire without having to engage with the whole potentially problematic topic of sex itself, whether they have started out on that path or not. Porn without actual sex ? with Meyer refusing a request from her editor to include just one sex scene in her third novel **Eclipse** ? is here a winning formula. It can and does attract female readers from widely diverse cultural backgrounds, including those following the strict Mormon beliefs held by the author herself, without ever leading to awkward questions of taste or suitability.

Young British readers also have the additional pleasure of reading a story with an affluent American lifestyle where sixth formers routinely drive their own cars to school and shop for expensive dresses ready for the next prom. Bella has a loving but absent mother and a heavily preoccupied father who allows her total freedom. Initially a new girl at school in the area she has moved to, she soon has plenty of girlfriends and boy admirers. Slender, independent, strong-minded and clever, she has a lot going for her even before she meets and wins the gorgeous Edward, who simply can't help himself once he has spotted her. So while not a great literary creation, Bella remains a supreme fantasy object, as her millions of devoted and determinedly uncritical young readers continue to attest. Love at first bite indeed.

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Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' series is published by Atom in paperback and by Little, Brown in hardback:

**Twilight**, 978 1 904233 65 7, £6.99 pbk

**New Moon**, 978 1 904233 88 6, £7.99 pbk

**Eclipse**, 978 1 904233 91 6, £7.99 pbk

**Breaking Dawn**, 978 1 905654 28 4, £14.99 hbk

Photo of Stephenie Meyer by David Stone.

Stephenie Meyer

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