

Twilight: A Parent's Guide to the Vampire Series

Since Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series debuted in 2005, the four books about love-struck teenage vampires, werewolves and humans have taken the world by storm. More than 100 million copies have sold worldwide, and translation rights have been purchased in 50 nations. The first film adaptation, *Twilight*, generated \$408 million internationally, followed by another \$709 million for the second installment, *New Moon*. Still, the book's largely young, female fans anxiously awaited Friday's release of the final film in the series, *Breaking Dawn Part 2*.

Observers say the books about a vampire named **Edward Cullen** who hunts game rather than humans and falls in love with a teenage girl named **Bella Swan** is, at its core, a classic romance. Youth minister Kimberly Powers says that after talking with dozens of *Twilight* fans, she found the books tapped into a deep longing for love and meaning. "The girls weren't coming for the vampires, they were coming for the love story," says Powers, co-founder of Walk the Talk Youth Ministries and author of *Escaping the Vampire*. "These girls are just longing to be accepted. I've seen this for years and years. This is just another way of drawing them."

Powers doesn't denounce the series, but uses it as a tool in her book and at youth conferences: "I want girls to think, *I thought Edward Cullen was the thing, but wow, Jesus is truly my rescuer and hero.*"

Christians' views on *Twilight*'s value as entertainment or a ministry tool vary widely. Even the series' detractors say it has some positive elements. Edward and his vampire family resist their instinct to destroy human lives, Edward insists on remaining abstinent until marriage, and Bella refuses to end a life-threatening pregnancy. But they say the good

doesn't outweigh the bad.

"Edward is noble and he overcomes temptation and he takes care of Bella and ... he waits until after marriage to have sex with her—he's just a good guy," says Steve Wohlberg, a California-based minister and author of *The Trouble With Twilight*. "But the danger is that he's still a vampire, and ... even though he has all these good qualities, he still has supernatural psychic powers, which links him to **occultism**."

Although he says **Twilight** represents "a kind of sanitized vampirism," Wohlberg worries that it may be part of a satanic ploy to desensitize youth to the evil of the occult, including vampirism. In the books, Bella is willing to give up her soul to be with Edward, but more alarming to Wohlberg is the real-life experience of the books' Mormon author.

In interviews, Meyer, a married mother of three, has said the idea for *Twilight* came from a dream she had in June 2003, when she saw a sparkling handsome boy in a meadow who was in love with a human girl and having a hard time resisting his desire to drink her blood. When Meyer woke up from that dream, she says she felt compelled to start writing the story.

After Meyer wrote the first book, she says she had another dream in which Edward told her she'd sanitized the story. "Edward actually showed up and told me that I got it all wrong and, like, he exists and everything but he couldn't live off animals ... and I kind of got the sense he was going to kill me," Meyer told MovieFone last year. "It was really terrifying and bizarrely different from every other time I've thought about his character."

"You have to ask yourself from a Christian perspective, who is the author of this dream?" Wohlberg says. "I believe it came from Satan. ... I'm just totally convinced that behind the scenes, we're dealing with a **supernatural battle** between God and the devil."

But the concerns aren't limited to the books' focus on vampires and werewolves, which in Meyer's books protect humans from the vampires. For many observers, Bella's relationship with Edward is equally problematic.

"Bella ... is willing to erase herself, give up all her plans, her hopes, her dreams," says Beth Felker Jones, an assistant professor of theology at Wheaton College who examines Twilight's themes in *Touched by a Vampire*. "She becomes only about her love and not about anything else in her life, and I think that's not such a great image of what love ought to be with us or for us."

She says the books' abstinence message is also a mixed bag. "Yes, the characters wait until they're married, but ... at the end of the day, [the books] are still very erotically charged," Jones says. "They're still about wanting in really deep ways, and that's tied to danger because he's a vampire. There's more to think about than just to say: 'Oh look, these folks wait. Isn't it great to finally have some book in which this happens.'"

Few have criticized Twilight for promoting **Mormonism**, but some do see its theology laced within the pages. Wohlberg says Mormons believe it was good for Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, which Edward represents, because that was the path to godhood, overcoming evil and spiritual growth.

Jones says Edward and his vampire family's efforts to be good and resist their dark instincts to drink human blood also indicate a works-based approach to salvation.

"There's even explicit dialogue about surely God will reward us for trying," she says. "She's not trying to lay out a plan of salvation there, but I think it's part of a Mormon worldview [that] we're saved by works instead of grace."

Movie reviewer Steven Isaac of Focus on the Family's *Plugged In* thinks Christians should be careful with Twilight.

Throughout the books, Bella is seeking to escape her circumstances and find greater fulfillment in death. "For a lot of people, it boils down to this idea of not being content with where they are," Isaac says. "And that theme, which is so antithetical to what Scripture teaches us, is probably what troubles me the most about all the Twilight stuff."

Jim Chase, pastor of Forks Assembly of God (AG) in Forks, Wash., says Twilight isn't so bad. He says the movies aren't the best vampire films ever made, but in Forks, where the series is set, the series has helped boost the local economy, as tourists come to visit the sites mentioned in the books.

Unlike with the **Harry Potter** series, which made the children at his church want to wear crystals and cast spells, Chase says he hasn't seen a rise in interest in the occult or vampirism in the town of 3,200. Instead the "Twilighters" have become an unexpected mission field.

"Instead of us going into a foreign mission field, God is bringing people here," Chase says. "We show them Christ by our actions, we show them Christ by our attitude. ... Everybody does their best to share."

Forks AG member Merle Watson is one of those sudden missionaries. Since tourists started checking into the Forks hotel where he works, the 80-year-old grandfather says he's been able to tell hundreds of people about what he calls the ultimate love story.

"I know I'm getting shot down by some people who say I'm making evil good because vampires and werewolves, they're evil," Watson says. "But the people that are coming in here are searching for love. I think if the churches are not meeting this need, we're failing. We're falling short. It's just love they're looking for."

Adrienne S. Gaines is former news editor for *Charisma magazine*.