

Twilight Phenomenon Gets Mixed Reaction From Christians

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✖ The popular Twilight series, which has spawned a film franchise that releases its second installment, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, Friday, is getting mixed reactions from Christians who alternately see it as a doorway into Satanism or a tool for evangelism.

Since 2005, Mormon author Stephenie Meyer's four novels about a vampire named Edward Cullen who hunts game rather than humans and falls in love with teenager Bella Swan have sold more than 70 million copies. The film adaptation of the first book, *Twilight*, generated \$384 million.

In Forks, Wash., where the Twilight series is set, tourism jumped from 18,000 in 2008 to more than 64,000 so far this year. Christians in the town of 3,200 say interest in the books has not only bolstered the local economy but also created a new mission field.

"Instead of us going into a foreign mission field, God is bringing people here," said Jim Chase, pastor of Forks Assembly of God. "We do friendship evangelism. We show them Christ by our actions, we show them Christ by our attitude."

Member Merle Watson, 79, says he's been able to witness to at least 1,000 people since tourists started checking into the Forks hotel where he works to spend a day visiting sites mentioned in the books. Most, he said, are drawn to the story's romance. One college-age woman even began to cry as

she told him about the book's appeal. "I would give anything if someone loved me like that," the woman told him.

"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 said. "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."

Youth minister Kimberly Powers takes a similar view. After talking with dozens of Twilight fans, she found that 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," said Powers, co-founder of Walk the Talk Youth Ministries and author of *Escaping the Vampire*. (Read more about vampire-themed Christian books.)

"These girls are just longing to be accepted," she added. "I've seen this for years and years. This is just another way of drawing them."

Powers wants her book and a forthcoming conference series to compel Twilight readers to see Jesus as their rescuer and hero.

"I want girls to think, *I thought Edward Cullen was the thing, but wow, Jesus is truly my rescuer and hero*," Powers said. "There just is no comparison. They can get swept up in God's epic story of love. Why settle for fiction when you can have the real thing?"

Iowa minister Bill Schnoebelen, a former Satanist who practiced vampirism for several years, says Christians should avoid Twilight altogether. Unlike fantasies such as *The Lord of the Rings*, Twilight can spur a dangerous fascination with the occult, he says.

Since Anne Rice's novel *Interview With the Vampire* and the subsequent film adaptation, Schnoebelen said interest in vampirism has been slowly increasing as a subset of Satanism and the Goth subculture. Now, he says, hundreds of people drink blood as part of vampire cults.

"Yes, [Twilight] is partly fantasy, but there are people who do these things," he said. "It's a false religion."

Even though many Twilight fans may not explore vampirism, he said the books are giving it a dark kind of glamour. "It's a hard thing to get out of," said Schnoebelen, who came to Christ in 1984 and now leads With One Accord Ministries to help others find deliverance from occultism. "If it wasn't for the grace of God I'd either be dead or insane somewhere."

Schnoebelen's concerns are not only about the book's spiritual content. Having earned a master's degree in counseling in 1990, he said Bella's relationship with Edward is equally problematic.

"She's totally destroyed when he goes away," Schnoebelen said. "The only way she can have any kind of peace is when she goes and does some risky behavior. ... She can't exist without this young vampire man. When you think that these books target teen girls, I think that's very reprehensible."

Author Beth Felker Jones, an assistant professor of theology at Wheaton College, has similar concerns.

"Bella ... is willing to erase herself, give up all her plans, her hopes, her dreams," said Jones, 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."

Jones encourages Christians to make their own decision about whether to read the books or watch the films, but she says

those do so should view Twilight through "Christ-centered" eyes.

Some Christian parents applaud the books' promotion of abstinence or the pro-life message presented when Bella faces a life-threatening pregnancy. But Jones worries about Christians' willingness to jump on popular bandwagons if there's even a hint of light.

"Yes, the characters wait until they're married, but ... at the end of the day, [the books] are still very erotically charged," Jones said. "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.'"

Pastor Chase of Forks Assembly of God neither encourages nor discourages his members from reading the books or watching the movie. He says attacks against the Harry Potter books a few years back only made the children in his church want to read them.

"Banning books ... causes people to want to run toward it more," he said. "What we need to be worried about is being Christ to these people as they come to town."