Bringing Light to Twilight
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Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon

Edited by
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In a society that moves as fast as ours, where every week a new “blockbuster” must be enthroned at the box office, or where idols are fabricated by consensus every new television season, the promise of something everlasting, something truly eternal, holds a special allure.

—Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan

Every age “discovers” what in a work of art relates most to its own needs and desires, even if the artist himself was not consciously aware of all he created.

—Lester Friedman

Of the myriad books, television programs, and films about vampires that have flooded US culture at the start of the twenty-first century, the most commercially successful to date is the Twilight series by Stephenie Meyer. Between the publication of the first novel, Twilight (2005), and June 2010, when the spin-off novel The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner was released, the four-volume saga had sold more than 100 million copies. The initial installment was the best-selling book of 2008; the fourth and final narrative, Breaking Dawn, sold 1.3 million copies on the first day alone. The popularity of Twilight, New Moon, Eclipse, and Breaking Dawn led US teens to vote Meyer into one of the top spots of the American Library Association’s “Teens’ Top Ten” contest for four years in a row: in 2006, J.K. Rowling still reigned supreme, and Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince was placed first, with Twilight ranking second; in 2007, approximately 6,000 teenagers across the country selected New Moon as their favorite book of the year; and in 2008, over 8,000 voters named Eclipse as number one. Astoundingly, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows came in second place; an ABC news story remarked on how Eclipse had struck the seemingly invincible Rowling from her “perch atop bestseller lists. Not bad for someone who, a few short years ago, never would have dreamed of being a writer.”

The Twilight novels have been translated into thirty-seven languages, and their popularity earned Meyer the title of USA Today’s 2008 “Author of the Year,” as well as numerous comparisons to J.K. Rowling. Twilight might very well be the most significant children’s literature series since the Harry Potter novels: as of September 2010, the four novels had spent 162 weeks on the New York Times best-selling [children’s series] list, accompanied by P.C. Cast and Kristin Cast’s House of Night vampire novels,
which occupied a place on the list for 106 weeks—largely, one might argue, due to the influence of Meyer’s work. And in 2009, more than half a million Twilight-related items were sold on eBay, second only to New York Yankees paraphernalia, popular especially in light of the team’s World Series win. Therefore, when I was offered the opportunity to gather a diverse group of writers to delve into the Twilight books, I jumped at the chance.

Bringing Light to Twilight: Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon makes no claims for justifying the aesthetic quality, widespread acclaim, or adult readership of Meyer’s fiction; rather, its primary goal is to take a rigorous analytical view of the books—one that can be appreciated by those inside and outside the academy. The contributors and I hope that although most (but not all) of these chapters have been produced within university settings, they will inspire conversations across a variety of audiences—teenagers and senior citizens, Mormons and Buddhists, college professors and junior high school students, stay-at-home moms and Marxist theorists. The Twilight series needs interrogation: it should not be rejected as simply pulp, pop culture, or the latestfad; neither should it be glorified as inviolable, sacred object. Whether Meyer’s books serve as time-passers, a vehicle for escapism, literacy training, exercise for the imagination or rational thinking, conditioners of social norms, models for dealing with problems, a means for improving a cranky or despondent mood, and/or a cultural artifact, they can affect and sway their readers, and this volume uncovers some of the ways this process is accomplished.

When the chapters for this collection were originally compiled, only one other critical exploration of Meyer’s novels was readily available: Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality, edited by Rebecca Housel and J. Jeremy Wisnewski (2009). Since that time, however, many other works have come to light. Twilight and History, by Nancy Reagin, provides young adult readers with historical contexts for various characters in the series. Approaching the novels from a religious standpoint, both The Twilight Phenomenon: Forbidden Fruit or Thirst-Quenching Fantasy? by Kurt and Olivia Bruner and Touched by a Vampire: Discovering the Hidden Messages in the Twilight Saga by Beth Felker Jones target older readers—particularly the parents of Twilight teens. Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise, edited by Melissa Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behn-Morawitz, focuses on the cultural, social, and economic aspects of the series. We anticipate that Bringing Light to Twilight will enter into scholarly conversation with these texts as well.

“Batty for Beautiful Vampires”

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there are few adults in the English-speaking world who have been untouched by the most recent surge of vampire narratives. The term “First Wave” might be used to describe some of the earliest fare—British popular literature of the nineteenth century (although the British by no means invented the genre)—writing such as John Polidori’s short story “The Vampyre” (1819), James Malcolm Rymer’s penny-dreadful Varney the Vampire (1845–1847), Joseph Sheridan LeFanu’s Carmilla (1872), Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s frequently anthologized “Good Lady Ducayne” (1896), and Bram Stoker’s
Dracula (1897). The 1970s brought about a resuscitation of vampire stories—a sort of “Second Wave”—following the publication of Anne Rice’s now-classic Interview with a Vampire (1976). An Amazon.com editorial review of Rice’s novel asserts that with her innovative narrative, “Rice refreshed the archetypal vampire myth for a late-20th-century audience.” Likewise, a 1977 stage production of the 1927 play Dracula—itself a recovery of Stoker’s novel—earned Tony Awards for Best Revival and for Edward Gorey’s costume design; Frank Langella, who was nominated for the Tony in the Best Leading Actor category, went on to reprise his role in the popular 1979 horror film. The blaxploitation movie Blacula (1972), starring William Marshall, and the independent film Ganja and Hess (1973) both brought vampire narratives to predominantly black audiences and critiqued the “whites only” view of vampires that accompanied earlier narratives. One can see tide-like circularity in these visions and revisions—different plot elements, characters, aspects of “folk” culture rush in and are carried out with each sweep of the current.

Writers like Rice, Poppy Brite, Suzy McKee Charnas, Brian Lumley, Christopher Moore, and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro have long had an impressive fan base, but relative newcomers such as Octavia Butler (Fledgling), Melissa de la Cruz (the Blue Bloods series), Tananarive Due (the Living Blood books), and Charlaine Harris (the Sookie Stackhouse novels) are part of the Third Wave swell that seems incapable of satiating an ardent—and growing—readership. Buffy the Vampire Slayer has found company among Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter, and Damali Richards from L.A. Banks’ Vampire Huntress legends. On primetime and in syndicated US television, vampire-plot episodes have appeared on The X-Files, CSI, Crossing Jordan, and Disney Channel’s The Wizards of Waverly Place. While series with vampire protagonists such as Blade, Forever Knight, Moonlight, and the BBC’s Being Human have not been able to garner and sustain the viewership of shows like Buffy and Angel, the fact is they are continually being pitched and produced. The Vampire Diaries has a strong teen and young adult following, earning several 2010 People’s Choice Award nominations, and the success of the first season of HBO’s True Blood rivaled that of more “realistic” programs such as The Sopranos and Sex in the City. In film production, a proliferation of vampire movies has blanketed world markets: for example, Daybreakers (2009) in the United States, Thirst (2009) in South Korea, and the Swedish sleeper hit Let the Right One In (2008).

In children’s literature, where at one time vampires would have been taboo—too brutal and frightening for youthful imaginations—one can find illustrated readers such as Bunnicula, Joann Sfar’s graphic novella The Little Vampire, Angela Sommer-Bodenburg’s Little Vampire series, Adele Griffin’s Vampire Island books, Sienna Mercer’s My Sister the Vampire series, the more macabre Cirque du Freak novels by Darren Shan, or Vampirates: Demons of the Ocean by Justin Somper, and so-called comprehensive guides such as Amy Gray’s How to Be a Vampire: A Fangs-On Guide for the Newly Undead and Lisa Trutkoff Trumbauer’s A Practical Guide to Vampires. For the young adult (YA) reader, P.C. Cast and her daughter, Kristin, co-author the House of Night books, which take place in a vampire finishing school; somewhat similar in setting are Richelle Mead’s Vampire Academy series and Rachel Caine’s Morganville Vampires narratives. M.T. Anderson’s Thirsty features a confused teenage vampire; and strikingly, in this age of alluring, seductive vampires, Neil Gaiman’s
The Graveyard Book, winner of the 2008 Newbery Award for most distinguished contribution to American children's literature, features Silas, the somewhat paternal and never explicitly named vampire figure who protects and provides for protagonist Nobody Owens. Vampires may be corpishly cold, but they are definitely "hot" in the current market. But this is just one reason for dedicating an entire collection of essays to Twilight.

Why Engage in This Project?

I have seen many adults scratch their heads, mystified by Meyer's spectacular popularity. Words like "insipid," "vapid," "shallow," and "sexist," often pop up. One of my former children's literature students commented, "[Meyer]'s writing is about as deep as a puddle." She—along with many others who rallied around her—found the Twilight books to be deficient in both style and depth when compared to the Harry Potter series. It should be noted, however, that like J.K. Rowling and other fantasy favorites C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephenie Meyer incites powerful loyalties: "[t]he critic who has the temerity to question the pleasure given to children by [her] series is very likely to be met with incredulity"—if not hostility.12

To further explain my interest in this Twilight project, I turn to commentary by children's literature scholar Jack Zipes. Although stated in response to the Harry Potter phenomenon, he aptly describes the dangers of an uncritical—and by this, I mean un-analytical—view of children's literary series. Zipes posits that the "phenomenal" aspect of the reception of certain books often obscures the criteria "for anyone who wants to take literature for young people seriously." He continues: "The ordinary becomes extraordinary, and we are so taken by the phenomenon that we admire, worship, and idolize it without grasping fully why we regard it with so much reverence and awe."13

As I argued was the case for Rowling's books in my collections Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays (2003) and Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays (2009), it is exactly because the Twilight saga has become so incredibly popular that it is intellectually and socially significant. Regardless of what nonenthusiasts think of the aesthetic value or substance of the books, because they are consumed so voraciously they should be taken quite seriously. As British children's literature scholar Peter Hunt argues, the writers read by the most children are those who must be examined most carefully: it is these authors "whose attitudes and politics are most likely to be stamped (through subconscious osmosis) into the national consciousness."14 Through young adulthood, children are impressionable, and can be emotionally and intellectually prone to automatically accepting the ideological constructs underlying all texts, from illustrated storybooks to chemistry textbooks to television commercials. Michael Benton provides a strong example when citing a study of 115 eighth and eleventh grade students' responses to magazine advertisements and short fiction: researchers found that the student-readers were predisposed to obscuring the lines between fiction and reality when speaking about the magazine images; they were also unlikely to respond critically to any of the texts.15 And thus, while most teen readers would probably be able to distinguish the fantastical elements of Meyer's novels as fiction, I wonder about their understanding of the social
interactions that occur in Bella’s world, where the protagonist is so readily embraced by her in-laws and gets to live happily ever after. Adults involved in young people’s lives must not necessarily look for behaviors that readers will mimic with precision; very few, except for the very young, will engage in this type of conduct. Rather, a key part of interpreting literature is uncovering the emotional responses that readers have to the characters and situations—people, places, and events that present a particular ethos as irresistibly appealing, repugnant and revolting, or somewhere in between. Teenagers will not necessarily read the Twilight novels and literally confuse their own world of homework and bad-hair days with Meyer’s imaginary world of vampires and werewolves, but they very well might begin to imagine themselves in different ways, with young women in particular identifying more with marriage than college, with risking one’s life for one’s first love, with serving as a passive shield rather than an active sword.  

Only by reading and re-reading and analyzing a story that presents its world in sometimes confusing ways can we strive to see our own world more clearly. Thus, the contributors examine not only what the saga explicitly states, but also what the narratives imply, what they disguise, and what they assume. The chapters that follow do not seek to destroy the world of fantasy; instead, they strive to loosen up the restrictive boundaries between pleasure and intellectual pursuit, and allow enjoyment at the same time as a critical engagement with the texts.

The Chapters

The chapters in Part One of Bringing Light to Twilight were selected around the theme of “Literary Contexts: Past and Present.” The contributors explore intertwining traditions and intertextual references—whether those be to previously published works, like Perrault’s fairy tales or gothic novels, or to more recently published writings that use Twilight as a source text. The description provided by contributors Kristina Deffenbacher and Mikayla Zagoria-Moffet serves us especially well: pulling from the theories of Julia Kristeva, they posit all instances of intertextuality as a type of vampirism, drawing life from and simultaneously transforming other narratives.  

Chapter 1, “The Wolf in the Woods,” exposes parallels between the first novel in Meyer’s series and early versions of the Little Red Riding Hood folktale. In doing so, contributor Margaret Kramar explores how Twilight perpetuates many conventional fairy tales’ insistence on women’s sexual chastity and submission to masculine authority. Indeed, Isabella Swan’s life reads very much like a Cinderella story: Bella is rescued from the apparent drudgery of cooking and cleaning—and school—to embark on a whirlwind romance and marriage to Prince Charming, her very own knight with shining fangs.

The Twilight saga also clearly falls heir to a long line of commonly read vampire literature: before Meyer, before Anne Rice, before Bram Stoker, one could find vampire lore in the works of Heinrich Ossenfelder, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Lord Byron, and John Keats, among others. Meyer’s saga follows in the tradition of the mid-eighteenth-century gothic novel, which intermingled features from the classic horror story and the chivalrous romance. Meyer also overtly embraces the Byronic hero of the Romantic tradition—the misunderstood character who experiences
alienation because he pursues his individual ideals rather than the social and cultural norms of his time. This description fits Edward to a “T.”

Much print has already been dedicated to Meyer’s blatant allusions to the “classics” of British writing: Twilight plots, themes, character names, dialogue, and epigraphs invoke Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, and Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights. In chapter 2, “Textual Vampirism in the Twilight Saga: Drawing Feminist Life from Jane Eyre and Teen Fantasy Fiction,” Deffenbacher and Zagoria-Moffet describe how Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre functions as another critical piece. Rather than reading Meyer’s Bella and the fiercely independent Jane oppositionally, they argue that Meyer, like Brontë, attempts to confront the tensions between women’s sexual vulnerability and desire. Chapter 3, “Serial Experiments in Popular Culture” by Carole Veldman-Genz, brings us closer to the present day in her textual comparison: she juxtaposes the Twilight saga with Laurell Hamilton’s popular Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series, the first novel of which was published in 1993. Like Deffenbacher and Zagoria-Moffet, Veldman-Genz attempts to understand current incarnations of the women’s empowerment movement—particularly third-wave feminism—through Twilight.

The next chapter—Kim Allen Gleed’s “Twilight, Translated”—studies Meyer’s original novel next to Luc Rigoureau’s French version, and provides insights as to what happens to both text and audience in the process of translation. Gleed contends that the practice not only increases readership, but also reveals much about the culture for which the narrative has been adapted. Chapter 5, “Variations, Subversions and Endless Love: Fan Fiction and the Twilight Saga,” tackles another practice, and another culture—that of fan fiction (writing by fans that revises favorite texts)—which takes place on the Internet. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth alleges that by continually extending and/or repeating the romantic core story, fanfic writers transform themselves from seemingly passive readers to active readers and writers. Chapter 6, “True Blood Waits: The Romance of Law and Literature,” also explores notions of “romance”—a figurative affair between law and literature. Lawyer Meredith Wallis intuits that the true love story of the saga is not, as might be first assumed, between Bella and Edward, but instead the narrative’s fascination with jurisprudence.

Children’s literature has long been read as subversive, whether because texts allow children to collude with the authors and each other against the adult world, or because they allow readers a form of escape. And yet, Peter Hunt wonders how subversive these narratives can really be: “It could be argued that they share with much popular culture the disruptive surface that disguises a profound conservatism.” Many of the chapters included in Bringing Light to Twilight interrogate the ways that Stephenie Meyer supports conventional ideology in her series, especially when it comes to gender. Rather than simply alleging that the author presents a sexist narrative with a distressingly passive heroine, however, the writers of the chapters in Part Two pursue the issue from a complex array of perspectives. Tammy Dietz, who was raised Mormon, uses her personal history in chapter 7, “Wake Up, Bella!” to critique the gender ideals she finds represented in Meyer’s books, which she attributes to the author’s religious faith. In chapter 8, Rhonda Nicol argues that although Bella Swan is often viewed in stark contrast to the “feminist darling” of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, it is more productive to consider the two characters as contemporaneous pop culture
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artifacts that reveal much about the current state of feminism. Chapter 9, “‘One is Not Born a Vampire, But Becomes One,’” examines representations of motherhood in the *Twilight* series. Merinne Whitton asserts that the saga depicts mothering as the epitome of women’s fulfillment; in the end, the narratives posit that mothering is what women are for.

Chapters 10 and 11, as well as Chapter 12 from Part Three, turn more explicitly to investigations of Edward Cullen. Tracy Bealer’s “Of Monsters and Men” contends that, by focusing exclusively on Bella as a submissive female figure, critics fail to see the ways that Edward challenges normative gender roles. In “The *Other* Edward,” Joseph Sommers and Amy Hume provide a distinct counter argument to Kathryn Kane’s piece on the heteronormative imperative in the *Twilight* series. They explore how Edward’s refusal to penetrate Bella—in both the vampiric and the literal, sexual sense—configures him as an “ideal” boyfriend, but also “queer.” Michael Goebel’s chapter, “‘Embraced’ by Consumption: *Twilight* and the Modern Construction of Gender,” demonstrates how Meyer supports capitalist cultures’ conceptions of masculinity and femininity as rooted in the attainment of wealth. Goebel remains unshocked by the success of the *Twilight* books and other vampire narratives of the past few decades: “it is not surprising that American culture, driven by material consumption, gravitates towards a figure like the vampire.”

Goebel’s chapter provides the transition to the third section of the collection—chapters on “Class, Race, and Green Space.” In chapter 13, we move from Goebel’s literary analysis of class in the novels to an examination of commodities and class in the mainstream culture influenced by Meyer’s books and films. In “Fashion Sucks…Blood?” Angie Chau reflects on the disparity between the fictional characters’ attitudes about fashion and ways that “vampire fashion” is manipulated by marketers and popular media. Chapters 14 and 15 address issues of race: in “Trailing in Jonathan Harker’s Shadow,” Joo Ok Kim and I maintain that, very much like Bram Stoker’s character in *Dracula*, Bella functions in *Twilight* as a kind of ethnographer: she occupies a position of power inaccessible to both Edward and Jacob, who figure as racialized “others” in her observations of the werewolf and vampire cultures. In “The Great American Love Affair: Indians in the *Twilight* Saga,” Brianna Burke uses Meyer’s novels and the film adaptations to lay bare how stereotypes of First Nations people are perpetuated. And Tara K. Parminter employs an ecocritical approach in chapter 16, “Green is the New Black: Ecophobia and the Gothic Landscape in the *Twilight* Series.” She argues that by challenging notions of gothic settings as dark, dismal, and frightening, Meyer subtly encourages readers to embrace the outdoors and resist the “uneasiness with nonhuman nature” typical of many twenty-first century subjects.

As scholars such as Karín Lesnik-Oberstein and Maria Nikolajeva have claimed, one cannot develop theories that posit a singular, nonindividualized “real” or “normal” reader. A “Twi-hard” of thirty-five, for example, might not be able to see Meyer’s vampires as potential symbols of human relationships with the divine, while a nineteen-year-old philosophy major might. Another reader might not be able to perceive some of Edward’s attitudes toward Bella as dangerous, whereas the teen survivor of domestic abuse might readily intuit this idea from the narratives. One participant in a discussion group I attended identified Bella as “frustrating” in her lack of self-confidence
and her obsession with Edward’s perfection; another saw her as a realistic portrait of a “boy-crazy” high school student; yet another found her sexuality “empowering.” A reader’s analysis will be affected by numerous factors, including age, the era she grows up in, nationality, culture, racial or ethnic background, education, life experiences, gender, position in the sibling lineup, and socioeconomic class. Because of this, what any reader—but particularly young readers—will take from the *Twilight* books is impossible to pinpoint or to project. A more valuable approach, I believe, is considering what topics some of them might question—either as they read, a few weeks down the road, or years into the future—or areas in which they could be challenged.

This book therefore does not lay claim to any “correct” answers that can fit the experiences of every member of every community. Most of the issues raised in the project have many defensible positions; we simply present them as topics to think about and explore. All literary works contain “gaps” that allow individual readers to make individual inferences, link ideas, build metaphors, and conceptualize characters in certain ways. By interpreting a text, filling in the gaps, and creating meaning from the words on the page, the reader “makes choices . . . [and thus no] reader”—neither child nor adult—“can ever exhaust the full potential of any text.”

The contributors to this volume are quite varied in nationality and background—they currently reside in the United States, England, Sweden, and Germany. While most are literary scholars, the professions of creative writing and law are also represented. Similarly, readers of this collection could also be quite varied: students interested in investigating the field of children’s literature, writers of young adult texts, librarians, teachers, sociologists, stay-at-home parents, those who want to know more about the books that have captivated the attention of the young people in their lives, nonspecialists in English who are interested in delving deeper into the meanings of *Twilight* and its sequels, or are simply curious about what a few academics have to say about the series. Even though all of these readers will have different backgrounds, purposes, and understandings of what Meyer’s books do (or aim to do), we anticipate that *Bringing Light to Twilight* will inspire continued thought and discussion.

Notes

3. When writers refer to the *Twilight* saga throughout this collection of essays, they are not including the *Bree Tanner* novella—an offshoot of *Eclipse*, Meyer’s third novel in the series—unless specifically noted.
4. Over 5,000 teens voted on-line.