

## **Bite Me! (Or Don't)**

by Christine Seifert

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*Stephenie Meyer's vampire-infested Twilight series has created a new YA genre: abstinence porn*

Abstinence has never been sexier than it is in Stephenie Meyer's young adult four-book Twilight series. Fans are super hot for Edward, a century-old vampire in a 17-year-old body, who sweeps teenaged Bella, your average human girl, off her feet in a thrilling love story that spans more than 2,000 pages. Fans are enthralled by their tale, which begins when Edward becomes intoxicated by Bella's sweet-smelling blood. By the middle of the first book, Edward and Bella are deeply in love and working hard to keep their pants on, a story line that has captured the attention of a devoted group of fans who obsess over the relationship and delight in Edward's superhuman strength to just say no.

The Twilight series has created a surprising new sub-genre of teen romance: It's abstinence porn, sensational, erotic, and titillating. And in light of all the recent real-world attention on abstinence-only education, it's surprising how successful this new genre is. Twilight actually convinces us that self-denial is hot. Fan reaction suggests that in the beginning, Edward and Bella's chaste but sexually charged relationship was steamy precisely because it was unconsummated—kind of like Cheers, but with fangs. Despite all the hot "virtue," however, we feminist readers have to ask ourselves if abstinence porn is as uplifting as some of its proponents seem to believe.

Given that teens are apparently still having sex—in spite of virginity rings, abstinence pledges, and black-tie "purity balls"—it might seem that remaining pure isn't doing much for the kids these days anyway. Still, the Twilight series is so popular it has done the unthinkable: knocked Harry Potter off his pedestal as prince of the young adult genre. The series has sold more than 50 million copies, and Twilight fan fiction, fan sites, and fan blogs crowd the Internet. Scores of fans have made the trek to real-life Forks, Wash., where the series is set. The first of a trilogy of film adaptations of the books, starring Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, was scheduled to hit theaters in time for Christmas.

Nowhere was readers' multigenerational infatuation with Bella and Edward's steamy romance more evident than in their "engagement" party at a Sandy, Utah, Barnes & Noble store. On the evening of August 1, 2008, before the fourth book was released, guests flocked to the store wearing formal wedding attire to celebrate the happy fictional couple. Preteen girls in princess dresses, "My Heart Belongs to Edward" stickers plastered to their faces, posed for photos. Grandmothers in flowing gowns or homemade "I Love Edward" t-shirts stood in line to play Twilight trivia. Clever teen boys in Edward costumes fought off ersatz Bellas.

The air in the store was electric as fans broke into two groups: the much smaller group of Jacob fans (Jacob is Bella's best friend who is hopelessly in love with her, but it's a doomed relationship since Jacob is a werewolf, a lifelong enemy of the vamps) and the group of rabid Edward fans. The questions of the night were: Will Edward and Bella finally do it? If so, will the magic be ruined when the abstinence message is gone? But nobody seemed to

be asking an even more important question: Has the abstinence message—however unwittingly—undermined feminist sensibilities?

The answers came sooner than expected. After the engagement party, fans rushed home with their copies of *Breaking Dawn*, only to discover that Edward and Bella go all the way in the first few chapters, after they get married, of course. But it seems that in the context of marriage and parenthood (which comes quickly, natch), Edward and now-19-year-old Bella are just like our traditional grandparents. Or the Moral Majority.

*Breaking Dawn*'s Bella is a throwback to a 1950s housewife, except for the fact that Edward has turned her into a vampire. But this act is one of '50s-esque female self-sacrifice: It's precipitated by Bella's need to let her human self die in order to save their half-vampire baby. Their monstrous offspring is frightening, but what's really frightening is Bella and Edward's honeymoon scene. Edward, lost in his own lust, "makes love" so violently to Bella that she wakes up the next morning covered in bruises, the headboard in ruins from Edward's romp. And guess what? Bella likes it. In fact, she loves it. She even tries to hide her bruises so Edward won't feel bad. If the abstinence message in the previous books was ever supposed to be empowering, this scene, presented early in *Breaking Dawn*, undoes everything.

What's worrisome is that fans are livid about the last book not because of the disturbing nature of Bella and Edward's sexual relationship, but because they consummated it in the first place. Shimmerskin, a poster on the message board [Twilightmoms.com](http://Twilightmoms.com), summed it up best for a number of defeated fans: "The first three books were alive with sheer romanticism but I never felt it in [*Breaking Dawn*]. The sweep and scope of a grand love affair in [the first three books] was absent. The brilliantly innocent eroticism that took our breath away was also gone." Some fans are so upset at this loss of "innocence" they've created an online petition demanding answers from Meyer and her publisher, Little, Brown. "We were your faithful fans...," the petitioners write. "We are the people that you asked to come along with you on this journey, and we are disappointed."

Perhaps some of this bitter disappointment stems from book four's departure into adult territory, where Bella becomes a traditional—and boring—teenaged mom. The removal of the couple's sexual tension reveals two tepid, unenlightened people. Neither character has much to offer outside the initial high school romance storyline: Bella doesn't have any interesting hobbies, nor is she particularly engaged in the world around her. Her only activity outside her relationship with Edward seems to be cooking dinner for her father. Edward hangs out with his family, but the bulk of his 24 hours a day of wakefulness seems to go to either saving Bella from danger or watching her when she sleeps—you know, that age-old savior/stalker duality. Romantic!

As other feminists like Anna N. on [Jezebel.com](http://Jezebel.com) have pointed out, Edward is a controlling dick, a fact that becomes abundantly clear in the leaked pages of Meyer's first draft of *Midnight Sun*, a retelling of *Twilight* from Edward's perspective. In those pages, available on Meyer's website, Edward imagines what it would be like to kill Bella. "I would not kill her cruelly," he thinks to himself. Ever the gentleman, Edward. His icy calculation of how best to kill Bella is horrifying, and it illustrates the disconnect between the two characters.

By extension, readers who interpreted Edward's reluctance to be near Bella in *Twilight* as evidence of his innocent "crush" on her are forced to recognize that even Edward—the dream guy—is not at all he's cracked up to be. Digging into Edward's mind reinforces the old stereotype that underneath it all, even the best guys are calculating vampires, figuring out how to act on their masculine urges. Edward holds all the power, while Bella—and female readers—romanticizes the perfect man who doesn't exist. It's no wonder that *Midnight Sun* has not been widely released: It would likely spark even greater fan ire.

Such disappointment suggests something about the desire readers have for abstinence messages; it may also suggest readers' belief that, pre-sex, Edward and Bella were the perfect couple. In reality, the abstinence message—wrapped in the genre of abstinence porn—objectifies Bella in the same ways that "real" porn might. The *Twilight* books conflate Bella losing her virginity with the loss of other things, including her sense of self and her very life. Such a high-stakes treatment of abstinence reinforces the idea that Bella is powerless, an object, a fact that is highlighted when we get to the sex scenes in *Breaking Dawn*.

Of course the paradox is that the more Meyer sexualizes abstinence, the more we want Bella and Edward to actually have sex. This paradox becomes extra-convoluted when we find out, in a moment that for some is titillating, for others creepy, that sex could literally equal death for Bella. In one scene in *Twilight*, Bella asks Edward in a roundabout way if they would ever be able to consummate their relationship. Edward responds, "I don't think that...that...would be possible for us." Bella responds, "Because it would be too hard for you, if I were that...close?" Yes, Edward tells her. But more than that he reminds her that she's "soft" and "so fragile" and "breakable." "I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident."

And it's not just Bella's life that's at stake—it's her very humanity. The closer she and Edward get, the more tempting it is for him to bite her and turn her into a vampire, and the conflation of his vampiric and carnal urges is obvious. As *Midnight Sun* reveals, Edward's bloodlust is every bit as potent as his romantic love. It doesn't take a Freudian to read Edward's pulsating, insistent vampire lips pressed against Bella's pale, innocent neck as an analogy for, well, something else. From clandestine meetings in Bella's bedroom to time spent in a forest clearing, Edward almost always has his lips on Bella's neck—a dangerous activity, as we learn in *Twilight* that "the perfume of [Bella's] skin" is an unbearably erotic and tempting scent for Edward. When they do kiss, Bella often loses control of herself, which means Edward must be ever-vigilant in controlling "his need." After their first kiss, Bella asks if she should give him some room. "No," he tells her, "it's tolerable." He goes on, "I'm stronger than I thought." Bella responds, "I wish I could say the same. I'm sorry."

Fan fiction reveals fans' tacit understanding of the serious dangers of sex and the excitement of it, illustrating that readers have picked up on Meyer's analogy where the sexual penetration of Bella's human body is akin to the vampiric penetration of Bella's skin. One piece of fan fiction was posted to [TheTwilightSaga.com](http://TheTwilightSaga.com) on June 22, 2008, before the release of the fourth book, by a particularly ardent fan (hardy'sgirl). In the story, Edward and Bella have gotten married and are on their honeymoon. Edward begins kissing Bella (on her neck, of course), and then begins removing her jeans. Bella, with a pounding heart, asks herself, "Would I really let him go all the way?" Keep in mind that within this story,

Bella and Edward are married; waffling about “doing it” with your husband might point to the age and maturity of the writer, but it also taps into the fear of intimacy that Meyer establishes in the books. The fan writer picks up on that fear as she continues her story: As Edward becomes more sexually aroused, he turns into something Bella doesn’t recognize, and she begins to fight him. The fan writes:

Edward had become a monster. that dangerous vampire he held hidden away from me...and I was the one about to pay for it...he held my arms above my head pinned onto the bed in iron clasps. i was panicking and my breathing was fast. Edward sat up above me...and the look in his eyes weren't ones ive ever seen before...unless he was about to feed.

The rape fantasy is apparent, of course, but even more salient is the fan writer’s subconscious understanding of the theme Meyer has been establishing: that sex is dangerous and men must control themselves. It’s a matter of life or death, and ultimately men are in charge.

It’s clear from both the books and the fan fiction response to them that Edward has taken on the role of protector of Bella’s human blood and chastity, both of which, ironically, are always in peril when Edward is nearby. Bella is not in control of her body, as abstinence proponents would argue; she is absolutely dependent on Edward’s ability to protect her life, her virginity, and her humanity. She is the object of his virtue, the means of his ability to prove his self-control. In other words, Bella is a secondary player in the drama of Edward’s abstinence.

Reader Shimmerskin again astutely notes, “...it’s so clever that these books aren’t just about sexual abstinence. Edward is fighting two kinds of lust at the same time. Abstaining from human blood has probably been good practice for tamping down his sexual appetites now that he’s with Bella...”

It’s arguably clever, sure, but it’s also a sad commentary on Bella’s lack of power. Ultimately, it’s a statement of the sexual politics of Meyer’s abstinence message: Whether you end up doing the nasty or not doesn’t ultimately matter. When it comes to a woman’s virtue, sex, identity, or her existence itself, it’s all in the man’s hands. To be the object of desire, in abstinence porn is not really so far from being the object of desire in actual porn.

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