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## What Girls Want: Vampires

# What Girls Want

A SERIES OF VAMPIRE NOVELS ILLUMINATES THE COMPLEXITIES OF FEMALE ADOLESCENT DESIRE.

By Caitlin Flanagan

**C**HILDREN'S BOOKS ABOUT divorce—which are unanimously dedicated to bucking up those unfortunate little nippers whose families have gone belly-up—ask a lot of their authors. Their very premise, however laudable, so defies the nature of modern children's literature (which, since the Victorian age, has centered on a sentimental portrayal of the happy, intact family) that the enterprise seems doomed from the title. Since the 1950s, children have delighted in the Little Bear books (Mother Bear: "I never did forget your birthday, and I never will")—but who wants to find a copy of Cornelia Maude Spelman's *Mama and Daddy Bear's Divorce* wedged onto the shelf? Still, the volumes fill a need: helping children understand that life on the other side of the custody hearing can still be happy and hopeful, that a broken family is not a ruined one.

But pick up a novel written for adolescents in which the main character is a child of divorce, and you're in very different waters. Divorce in a young-adult novel means what being orphaned meant in a fairy tale: vulnerability, danger, unwanted independence. It also means that the protagonists must confront the sexuality of their parents at the moment they least want to think about such realities. It introduces into a household the adult passions and jealousies that have long gone to ground in most middle-aged parents, a state of affairs that is particularly difficult for girls, who have a more complicated attitude toward their own emerging sexuality than do boys, and who are far more rooted in the domestic routines and traditions of their families, which constitute the vital link between the sweet cocooning of childhood and their impending departure from it.

The only thing as difficult for a girl as a divorce—if we are to judge from stories aimed at the teen market—is a move. Relocating is what led to the drug addiction, prostitution, and death that freaked out a generation of readers in *Go Ask Alice*, and to the teenybopper dipsomania of *Sarah T.: Portrait of a Teenage Alcoholic*. In the most perfectly constructed young-adult novel of the past few decades, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, Judy Blume heightened the anxiety in her tale of a girl awaiting her first period by beginning the story with Margaret's move to the suburbs. The drama and anguish with which girls confront such disruptions to their domestic lives are typical both of the narcissism that can make living with a teenage girl one of the most unpleasant experiences God metes out to the unsuspecting, and of the ways that, for women, puberty is the most psychologically complex and

### THE TWILIGHT SAGA

By Stephenie Meyer

LITTLE, BROWN

emotionally alive experience of their lives. Why wouldn't a girl buck against leaving her hometown? Never again will she have such intense friendships, such a burning need to be in constant contact with the circle of girls (the best friend, the second-best friend, the whole court as carefully considered and clearly delineated as a bridal party) who sustain her through their shared experience of the epic event of female adolescence.

**T**WILIGHT IS THE FIRST in a series of four books that are contenders for the most popular teen-girl novels of all time. (The movie based on the first book was released in November.) From the opening passage of the first volume, the harbingers of trouble loom: 17-year-old Bella Swan is en route to the Phoenix airport, where she will be whisked away from her beloved, sunny hometown and relocated to the much-hated Forks, Washington, a nearly aquatic hamlet of deep fogs and constant rains. The reason for the move is that Mom (a self-absorbed, childlike character) has taken up with a minor-league baseball player, and traveling with him has become more appealing than staying home with her only child. Bella will now be raised by her father, an agreeable-enough cipher, who seems mildly pleased to have his daughter come to live with him, but who evinces no especial interest in getting to know her; they begin a cohabitation as politely distant and mutually beneficial as a particularly successful roommate matchup off Craigslist. Bella's first day at her new school is a misery: the weather is worse than she could ever have imagined, and the one silvery lining to the disaster is the mystery and intrigue presented by a small group of students—adopted and foster children of the same household—who eat lunch together, speak to no one else, are mesmerizingly attractive, and (as we come rather quickly to discover) are vampires. Bella falls in love with one of them, and the novel—as well as the three that follow it—concerns the dangers and dramatic consequences of that forbidden love.

I hate Y.A. novels; they bore me. That's a disappointing fact of my reading

life, because never have I had such an intense relationship with books as when I was a young girl. I raged inside them and lived a double emotional life (half real girl, half inhabitant of a distant world). *To Sir, With Love* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Forever and Rebecca*, *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* and *Mrs. Mike*, *Gone With the Wind* and *Rich Man, Poor Man*, and even *Valley of the Dolls* (an astonishing number of whose 8 million readers turned out to be teenagers) and *Peyton Place*, as well as any movie-star biography I could get my hands on (Judy Garland, Greta Garbo—in those days, you had to have been long dead or seriously faded to be worthy of such a biography) and a slew of far less famous books written exclusively for the teen-girl market and published in paperback, never to be heard of again—all of these books consumed me in a way that no other works of art or mass culture ever have. I chose books neither because of, nor in spite of, their artistic merit, only for their ability to pull me through the looking glass.

When I read in "The Dead" that Lily was "literally run off her feet," I did not care about, or even notice, the misuse of the word *literally*, nor did it occur to me to observe that this subtle deployment of a Dublin colloquialism hinted at the story's point of view. What I cared about, intensely, was what it would feel like to be sent running up and down the stairs of a house as a teenage maid, with holiday gaieties in full force, and everyone being mean to me, instead of pampering and babying me the way my parents did on Christmas Eve. I can remember lying on my bed in a Dublin row house at 15, so immersed in Margaret Mitchell that I faked three days of illness to keep reading, and I remember lying in my own bed in Berkeley—the cat dozing at my feet, the bay wind brushing the tree branches against my dormer windows—and roaring through *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* completely at home in turn-of-the-century Williamsburg, a

place I had never even heard of before picking up the book but which I could navigate, in the landscape of my imagination, as easily as I could the shady streets and secret hillside staircases that connected my house to the record shop and ice-cream parlor down on Euclid Avenue.

The salient fact of an adolescent girl's existence is her need for a secret emotional life—one that she slips into during her sulks and silences, during her endless hours alone in her room, or even just when she's gazing out the classroom window while all of Modern European History, or the niceties of the *passé composé*, sluice past her. This means that she is a creature designed for reading in a way no boy or man, or even grown woman, could ever be so exactly designed, because she

is a creature whose most elemental psychological needs—to be undisturbed while she works out the big questions of her life, to be hidden from view while still in plain sight, to enter profoundly into the emotional lives of others—are met precisely by the act of reading.

**T**WILIGHT IS FANTASTIC. It's a page-turner that pops out a lurching, frightening ending I never saw coming. It's also the first book that seemed at long last to rekindle something of the girl-reader in me. In fact, there were times when the novel—no work of literature, to be sure, no school for style; hugged mainly to the slender chests of very young teenage girls, whose regard for it is on a par with the regard with which just yesterday they held *Hannah Montana*—stirred something in me so long forgotten that I felt embarrassed by it. Reading the book, I sometimes experienced what I imagine long-married men must feel when they get an unexpected glimpse at pornography: slingshot back to a world of sensation that, through sheer force of will and dutiful acceptance of life's fortunes, I thought I had subdued. The

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Twilight series is not based on a true story, of course, but within it is *the* true story, the original one. *Twilight* centers on a boy who loves a girl so much that he refuses to defile her, and on a girl who loves him so dearly that she is desperate for him to do just that, even if the wages of the act are expulsion from her family and from everything she has ever known. We haven't seen that tale in a girls' book in a very long time. And it's selling through the roof.

Bella and Edward meet on that unpleasant first day of school, in biology class. The only free spot in the room is next to Edward, a vacancy she initially falls into with a glimmer of excitement—like Dracula's Lucy and Mina, and like every other young woman who has ever come to the attention of a vampire, Bella is enthralled. But Edward demonstrates none of the pickup-artist smoothness of his kind. As she glances shyly at him before sitting down, he meets her eyes "with the strangest expression on his face—it was hostile, furious." As she takes the seat beside him, he leans away from her, "sitting on the extreme edge of his chair and averting his face like he smelled something bad."

In short, Edward treats Bella not as Count Dracula treated the objects of his desire, but as Mr. Rochester treated Jane Eyre. He evinces the most profound disdain and distaste for this girl. Even after they have confessed their love for each other, he will still occasionally glare at and speak sharply to her. At the end of that long first day at Forks High, Bella goes to the school office to drop off some paperwork, and who is there but Edward—trying to get himself transferred out of the class they share.

And yet they are such kindred spirits! They are both crackerjack biology students (Bella because she took an AP course back in Phoenix, and Edward because he has taken the class God knows how many times, given that he is actually 104 years old); they both love

the arts; they share a dim view of the many young men who would be Bella's suitors if only she would take an interest in them. All of these facts, combined with Edward's languid, androgynous beauty—slim and feline, possessed of tousled hair and golden eyes—predictably anger and confuse Bella, although they do nothing to cool her awakening physical passion for her smoldering, obdurate antagonist. (This poignant aspect of the female heart proves once again a theory advanced by a high-school chum of mine, an improbable

lothario who replied when I demanded that he explain his freakish success with the ladies: "Chicks thrive on rejection.") Edward puts the young girl into a state of emotional confusion and vulnerability that has been at the heart of female romantic awakening since the beginning of time.

Bella is an old-fashioned heroine: bookish, smart, brave, considerate of others' emotions, and naturally compe-

tent in the domestic arts (she immediately takes over the grocery shopping and cooking in her father's household, and there are countless, weirdly compelling accounts of her putting dinner together—wrapping two potatoes in foil and popping them into a hot oven, marinating a steak, making a green salad—that are reminiscent of the equally alluring domestic scenes in *Rosemary's Baby*). Indeed, the book, which is set in contemporary America and centers on teenage life and culture, carries a strange—and I imagine deeply comforting to its teenage-girl readers—aura of an earlier time in American life and girlhood. The effect is subtle, and probably unintentional on the part of its author, a first-time novelist, who was home with three small boys when she blasted out this marvelous book. Like the Harry Potter series, the *Twilight* books are ostensibly set in the present, but—in terms of the mores, attitudes, and even the central elements of daily life portrayed within them—clearly evoke the culture of the author's adolescence.

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The Harry Potter series, feats of wizardry aside, is grounded in a desperate curiosity about the life of the English public school, which was a constant in the imaginative lives of middle- and working-class children in the Britain of J. K. Rowling's youth, and was also a central subject of the comics and novels produced for British children. Stephanie Meyer has re-created the sort of middle-class American youth in which it was unheard-of for a nice girl to be a sexual aggressor, and when the only coin of the realm for a boy who wanted to get lucky was romance and a carefully waged campaign intended to convince the girl that he was consumed by love for her.

*Twilight* is a 498-page novel about teenagers in which a cell phone appears only toward the very end, and as a minor plot contrivance. The kids don't have iPods; they don't text-message each other; they don't have MySpace pages or Facebook accounts. Bella does have a computer on which she dutifully e-mails her mother now and then, but the thing is so slow and dial-up that she almost never uses it, other than on the morning that she decides to punch the word *vampire* into her wood-burning search engine to learn a thing or two about her squeeze. But the world of the past is alive in other, more significant ways: Bella's friends, all in search of "boyfriends," spend weeks thinking about whom they will invite to a Sadie Hawkins dance. After a friend (toward whom Bella has gently been directing one of her own admirers) finally goes on a big "date" (a lost world right there, in a simple word), she phones Bella, breathless: "Mike kissed me! Can you believe it?" It was a scene that could have existed in any of the books I read when I was an adolescent; but in today's world of Y.A. fiction, it constitutes an almost bizarre moment. (Few things are as bewildering to contemporary parents as the sexual mores and practices of today's adolescents. We were prepared to give our children a "sex is a beautiful thing" lecture; they were prepared to have oral sex in the eighth grade.)

Think, for a moment, of the huge teen-girl books of the past decade. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is about female empowerment as it's

currently defined by the kind of jaded, 40-something divorcées who wash ashore at day spas with their grizzled girlfriends and pollute the Quiet Room with their ceaseless cackling about the uselessness of men. They are women who have learned certain of life's lessons the hard way and think it kind to let young girls understand that the sooner they grasp the key to a happy life (which essentially boils down to a distaff version of "Bros before hos"), the better. In *Sisterhood*, four close friends might scatter for the summer—encountering everything from ill-advised sex with a soccer coach to the unpleasant discovery that Dad's getting remarried—but the most important thing, the only really important thing, is that the four reunite and that the friendships endure the vicissitudes of boys and romance. Someday, after all, they will be in their 50s, and who will be there for them—really there for them—then? The boy who long ago kissed their bare shoulders, or the raspy-voiced best friend, bleating out hilarious comments about her

puckered fanny from the next dressing room over at Eileen Fisher? *Gossip Girl*, another marketing sensation, replaces girls' old-fashioned need for male love and tenderness—these chippies could make a crack whore look like Clara Barton—with that for shopping and brand names. Notoriously set in an Upper East Side girls school that seems to combine elements of Nightingale-Bamford with those of a women's correctional facility after lights-out, the book gives us a cast of young girls whose desire for luxury goods (from Kate Spade purses to Ivy League-college admissions) is so nakedly hollow that the displacement of their true needs is pathetic. *Prep*—a real novel, not the result of a sales-team brainstorm—derives much of its pathos from the fact that the main character is never sure whether the boy she loves so much, and has had so many sexual encounters with, might actually constitute that magical, bygone character: her "boyfriend." The effect of *Prep* on teenagers is reminiscent of that of *The Catcher in the Rye*: both books describe that most rarefied of social worlds, the

East Coast boarding school, and yet young readers of every socioeconomic level have hailed them for revealing the true nature of their inner life. In *Prep*, the heroine wants something so fundamental to the emotional needs of girls that I find it almost heartbreaking: she wants to know that the boy she loves, and with whom she has shared her body, loves her and will put no other girl in her place.

Bella, despite all of her courage and competence, manages to end up in scrape after scrape: finding herself in the path of a runaway car, fainting at school, going shopping in a nearby city and getting cornered by a group of malevolent, taunting men. And over and over, out of nowhere, shoving the speeding car out of her way, or lifting her up in his arms, or scaring the bejesus out of the men who would harm her, is Edward. And at last, while she is recuperating from the near-rape, with a plate of ravioli in a café near the alley, he reveals all. Not since Maxim de Winter's shocking revelation—"You thought I loved Rebecca? ... I hated her"—has a

sweet young heroine received such startling and enrapturing news. As he gradually explains, Edward has been avoiding and scorning Bella not because he loathes her but because he is so carnally attracted to her that he cannot trust himself to be around her for even a moment. The mere scent of her hair is powerful enough that he is in a constant struggle to avoid taking—and thereby destroying—her. This is a vampire novel, so it is a novel about sex, but no writer, from Bram Stoker on, has captured so precisely what sex and longing really mean to a young girl.

**T**HE EROTIC RELATIONSHIP between Bella and Edward is what makes this book—and the series—so riveting to its female readers. There is no question about the exact nature of the physical act that looms over them. Either they will do it or they won't, and afterward everything will change for Bella, although not for Edward. Nor is the act one that might result in an equal giving and receiving of pleasure. If Edward fails—even once—in his great exercise in restraint, he will do what the boys in the old pregnancy-scare books did to their girlfriends: he will ruin her. More exactly, he will destroy

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**A teenage girl's most elemental psychological needs are met precisely by the act of reading.**

her, ripping her away from the world of the living and bringing her into the realm of the undead. If a novel of today were to sound these chords so explicitly but in a nonsupernatural context, it would be seen (rightly) as a book about "abstinence," and it would be handed out with the tracts and bumper stickers at the kind of evangelical churches that advocate the practice as a reasonable solution to the age-old problem of horny young people. (Because it takes three and a half very long books before Edward and Bella get it on—during a vampiric frenzy in which she gets beaten to a pulp, and discovers her Total Woman—and because Edward has had so many decades to work on his moves, the books constitute a thousand-page

treatise on the art of foreplay.) That the author is a practicing Mormon is a fact every reviewer has mentioned, although none knows what to do with it, and certainly none can relate it to the novel; even the supercreepy "compound" where the boring half of *Big Love* takes place doesn't have any vampires. But the attitude toward female sexuality—and toward the role of marriage and childbearing—expressed in these novels is entirely consistent with the teachings of that church. In the course of the four books, Bella will be repeatedly tempted—to have sex outside of marriage, to have an abortion as a young married woman, to abandon the responsibilities of a good and faithful mother—and each time, she makes the "right" decision. The series does not deploy these themes didactically or even moralistically. Clearly Meyer was more concerned with questions of romance and supernatural beings than with instructing young readers how to lead their lives. What is interesting is how deeply fascinated young girls, some of them extremely bright and ambitious, are by the questions the book poses, and by the solutions their heroine chooses.

Bella's fervent hope—one that will not be realized until the final novel—is that Edward will ravage her, and that they will be joined forever; the harrowing pain that is said to be the victim's lot at the time of consummation means nothing to her. She loves him and wants to make a gift to him of her physical body—an act fraught with ambiguous dangers (the *Twilight* series

so resonates with girls because it perfectly encapsulates the giddiness and the rapture—and the menace—that inherently accompany romance and sex for them). The ways in which his refusal and her insistence are accommodated are at the heart not only of this novel but of the entire series, and that inspires the rapture young girls feel for the books. This is not your seventh-grade human-development teacher passing around a dental dam

and thereby making you want to send a plume of fifth-period taco salad and Gatorade into her outstretched palm. This is sex and romance fully—ecstatically, dangerously—engaged with each other. At last, at last.

**A**S I WRITE this, I am sitting on the guest-room bed of a close friend, and down the hall from me is the bedroom of the daughter of the house, a 12-year-old reader extraordinaire, a deep-sea diver of books. She was the fourth person through the doors of the Westwood Barnes & Noble the midnight that the series' final volume, *Breaking Dawn*, went on sale, and she read it—a doorstep, a behemoth—in six hours, and then turned back to page one as though it were the natural successor to the last page.

Posted on this girl's door—above the fading sticker of a cheery panda hopping over a pink jump rope, and one of a strawberry and a lollipop (their low placement suggesting the highest reach of a very small child), and to the right of an oval-shaped decal bearing the single, angry imperative STOP GLOBAL WARMING—is a small, black, square-shaped sticker that reads MY HEART BELONGS TO EDWARD. In the middle is a photograph of a pair of shapely female hands proffering a red Valentine heart. Also taped to this girl's closed door is a single piece of lined paper, on which she has written, in a carefully considered amalgam of block letters and swirly penmanship and eight different colors of crayon:

EDWARD'S FAN CLUB  
YOU MAY ONLY ENTER IF YOU KNOW  
THE PASSWORD

That she had made her declaration for Edward on such a pretty, handmade sign was all-girl—as was her decision to leave up the old stickers from her childhood. One of the signal differences between adolescent girls and boys is that while a boy quickly puts away childish things in his race to initiate a sexual life for himself, a girl will continue to cherish, almost to fetishize, the tokens of her little-girlhood. She wants to be both places at once—in the safety of girl land, with the pandas and jump ropes, and in the arms of a lover, whose sole desire is

to take her completely. And most of all, as girls work all of this out with considerable anguish, they want to be in their rooms, with the doors closed and the declarations posted. The biggest problem for parents of teenage girls is that they never know who is going to come barreling out of that sacred space: the adorable little girl who wants to cuddle, or the hard-eyed young woman who has left it all behind.

Years and years ago, when I was a young girl pressing myself into novels and baking my mother pretty birthday cakes, and writing down the 10 reasons I should be allowed to purchase and wear to the eighth-grade dance a pair of Leggs panty hose, I knew that password. But one night a few years after that dance, I walked into a bedroom at a party and saw something I shouldn't have, and a couple of months after that I unwisely accepted a ride to the beach from a boy I hardly knew, and then I was a college girl carrying a copy of Hartt's history of Renaissance art across campus and wondering whether I should take out a loan and go to graduate school, and somewhere along the way—not precisely on the day I got my first prescription for birth control, and not exactly on the afternoon I realized I had fallen out of love with one boy and had every right to take up with another—somewhere along the way, I lost the code. One day I was an intelligent girl who could pick up almost any bit of mass-market fiction that shed light on the mysteries of love and sex, and the practicalities by which one could merge the two, and read it with a matchless absorption. *Valley of the Dolls* had been so crucial in my life not because of its word to the wise about the inadvisability of mixing Seconal and Scotch, but for the three sentences that explained how to go about getting undressed before the first time you have sex: go into the bathroom, take your clothes off, and re-emerge with a towel wrapped around yourself. One day I was that girl, and one day I was not, and from then on, if you wanted to tempt me to read a bit of trash fiction, I was going to need more compelling information than that.

Midway through *Twilight*, after Edward and Bella have declared their feelings for one another, she emerges from a classroom with a pal, uncertain

whether she will eat lunch with Edward, or whether he will once again have vanished into the air, as he has a tendency to do. "But outside the door to our Spanish class, leaning against the wall—looking more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to—Edward was waiting for me."

It's a small moment in the book, but it lit aglow some tiny room of memory, if only for a maddening moment. I thought about how romantically charged high schools are for their young inmates. In 12th grade, I had a class next to the student parking lot. As I sat there one grayish day, I saw my boyfriend emerge from a side door of the massive school, along with half a dozen of his friends. They were clearly in the grip of some new plan, and they stood around their parked cars for a few minutes, talking. Where were they going, and why couldn't I go along?

The boy I was dating leaned against his car and listened to them, and he laughed, but then something happened—I could see he had changed his mind, and as the others drove away, he stood there for a while, looking after them, and then he pushed away from the car and disappeared back into school. Maybe, at long last, he was taking seriously his father's warnings that he might not graduate if he kept ditching school.

The bell rang, the room emptied—and there he was, in the hallway outside my class. "Let's ditch," he said.

I was in worse academic shape than he was; my graduation and college admission depended on passing—as a senior!—my eighth-period geometry class (many trusted souls had assured me that I'd have a bright future, provided that I passed that damn course). And standing in front of me was a boy who had just abandoned his friends to spend the afternoon with me.

I can't remember a thing about geometry except the useless phrase *side-angle-side*, but for the rest of my life I'll remember the bottle of red wine we bought at a package store a mile from school, and the certainty (since proved) that in the scheme of things, I had made exactly the right decision. ■

*Caitlin Flanagan is the author of To Hell With All That (2006). She is at work on Girl Land, a book about the emotional life of pubescent girls.*