

UPDATE

VIRTUOUS VAMPIRES:
CAN ABSTINENCE BE SEXY?

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU CROSS JANE Austen's chaste romances with Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*? Some believe the answer is found in Mormon author Stephenie Meyer's work. Her novels about a sexually abstinent vampire have sold more than 40 million copies and have been translated into 37 languages.

It's not that Meyer's vampires are celibate. But unlike Anne Rice's pansexual vampires, who stand in a grand old tradition of vampire fiction as erotic thrillers, Meyer's *Twilight* series is peopled by chaste characters who play out traditional gender roles: Protagonist Bella is a dependent damsel in distress; vampire Edward is her knight in shining armor (a dark knight, anyway), and they do have sex—but not until the wedding bells toll approval in the fourth book of the series.

Remarkably, the *Twilight* series (four novels thus far) has gained a faithful following of Latter-day Saints who do not mind all the bloodsucking, as long as there is no heavy petting, and who were delighted last November when the adaptation of the first novel was released with a PG-13 rating—something almost unheard of for a vampire movie.

Perhaps even more remarkable is the explanation critics give for Meyer's success in the mainstream: that by delaying sex between Bella and Edward until after their marriage, Meyer is whipping up something even sexier than a sex scene—what author Lev Grossman calls in a *Time* magazine piece, “the erotics of abstinence.”

“Their tension comes from prolonged, superhuman acts of self-restraint,” Grossman says of Bella and Edward. “There’s a scene midway through *Twilight* in which, for the first time, Edward leans in close and sniffs the aroma of Bella's exposed neck. ‘Just because I’m resisting the wine doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the bouquet,’ he says. ‘You have a very floral smell, like lavender . . . or freesia.’ He barely touches her, but there's more sex in that one paragraph than in all the snogging in *Harry Potter*.”

“Meyer deserves credit for achieving something next to impossible,” echoes author Jennifer Hahn. “She makes abstinence sexy.”

Deseret News columnist Jerry Johnston believes that the new film allows young girls “to handle their budding sexuality in a safe and symbolic

way” but objects to the suggestion that *Twilight* is “smut for good girls.” Johnston is also impressed by the positive portrayal of the vampire Edward, who “listens to classical music and always has his girlfriend's back whenever she dangles in danger.”

“Fangs or no, that's the guy you wouldn't mind introducing to the folks,” Johnston writes.

Is Edward a clean-cut hero or a wolf in sheep's clothing? Either way, the carefully curbed attraction that Edward feels for Bella's blood resonates with Mormons because they know only too well what it is like to curb one's sex drive. Were Edward to yield to temptation and suck Bella's blood, he would transform her into a vampire.

“The entire time Edward and Bella could barely touch or kiss for fear that Edward might get carried away and suck her blood in a fit of passion,” a blogger who happens to be Meyer's cousin writes at NORMALMORMONS.COM. “Very similar to that of two young BYU/high school students who aren't yet married and can't touch each other for fear it will lead to sex. I'm sure it was easy for Stephenie to describe with first hand experiences.”

After reading Grossman's piece, Mormon blogger William Morris concludes that the “erotics of abstinence” is good news because it points to an untapped potential among Mormon writers.

“Meyer has done . . . something that I have long thought would be a rewarding strand of Mormon literature,” Morris writes at MOTLEYVISION.ORG. “That is, to explore how ab-



JEANETTE ATWOOD—BASED ON AN IDEA BY HUGO OLAIZ

Kissing, yes; heavy petting, no . . . I'm not so sure about bloodsucking.

stinence leads to a heavily charged play of small gestures among Mormon teenagers and young adults.”

Master of the macabre Stephen King has recently jumped into the discussion by observing that he understands why people, and young girls in particular, are attracted by Meyer's novels. “A lot of the physical side of it is conveyed in things like the vampire will touch her forearm or run a hand over skin, and she just flushes all hot and cold,” King told *USA Weekend*. “And for girls, that's a shorthand for all the feelings that they're not ready to deal with yet.”

However, in contrast to King's assessment, who has been

quoted as saying that “Meyer can't write a darn,” Grossman showers Meyer with praise for her craft as a writer, which Grossman calls “virtuosic.”

And on top of that, there's all that sizzling abstinence!

“It's never quite clear whether Edward wants to sleep with Bella or rip her throat out or both,” Grossman argues, “but he wants something, and he wants it bad, and you feel it all the more because he never gets it. That's the power of the *Twilight* books: they're squeaky, geeky clean on the surface, but right below it, they are absolutely, deliciously filthy.”

People

Critical. Of President Barack Obama, former presidential hopeful MITT ROMNEY, 61. In a recent speech, Romney told House Republicans that Obama answers to the “most extreme wing of the abortion lobby.” Romney added that the stimulus package proposed by the Democrats is a plan to “spend and borrow with reckless abandon.”



Charged. Developer WILLIAM J. HAMMONS, 64, for allegedly selling investments and taking commissions in what could be Utah's largest-ever financial fraud. Hammons, who formerly served as an LDS bishop in Las Vegas, is believed to have helped run a Ponzi scheme bilking some 800 investors, many of them Mormons from Las Vegas and St. George, out of more than \$180 million.



Convicted. JAMES BOUGHTON JR., 22, of killing LDS missionary Morgan W. Young and wounding his companion Joshua Heidbrink. The crimes occurred in Chesapeake, Virginia, on 2 January 2006. Boughton faces the possibility of life in prison.

Rescued. ANABELLE BRISTOL, 60, by two anonymous LDS missionaries who happened to pass by her burning home in St. Madeleine, Trinidad and Tobago. According to a story in the *Trinidad Tobago Express*, the two unnamed elders “became angels” when they rescued Bristol from a burning house.

Baptized Posthumously. Serial killer TED BUNDY. According to researcher Helen Radkey, Bundy was rebaptized and received his endowments in the Jordan River Temple last May. As soon as his rebaptism received media attention, the Church removed his record from the public database. It is widely believed that Bundy originally joined the Church while living in Utah circa 1975. Bundy, who raped and killed at least 29 women, was executed in 1989.

Appointed. Former *Los Angeles Times* publisher MARK HINCKLEY WILLES, 67, to Deseret Management Corp. As the new president and chief executive of Deseret Management, Willes will head the for-profit holding company that oversees commercial business attached to the LDS Church, including the *Deseret News* and KSL television. Willes, who was appointed to this position by the First Presidency, is the nephew of late President Gordon B. Hinckley.



Third Album. Released by pop/R&B artist JONNA PIRINEN, 26. Pirinen is well known in her native Finland, where her first album sold 14,000-shy of receiving a gold record designation. An LDS convert, Pirinen was baptized at the end of 2003.

Deceased. Correlation guru DANIEL H. LUDLOW, 84. After years teaching religion at BYU, Ludlow worked at Church headquarters, where he headed the correlation of all LDS publications. Ludlow also supervised the production of the annotated LDS edition of the King James Bible. As editor-in-chief of the 1992 *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Ludlow harnessed the creative energy of 750 authors, completing the project in five years.



Apologetic. Actor TOM HANKS, 52, after telling Fox News that Latter-day Saints are “un-American” for pushing through California's Proposition 8. Hanks issued a statement clarifying that even though he believes Proposition 8 is “codified discrimination,” his Fox News statement creates “more division when the time calls for respectful disagreement.” “No one should use ‘un-American’ lightly or in haste,” he added. “I did. I should not have.”



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