

Introduction to Spotlight

Why Read This Book?

Reading is an investment. We only have so much time and mental focus in any given day so we try to get the most return on those tasks we do with the cranial energy at hand between breakfast and bedtime. If you're like me, then, before picking up a book, whose every page represents a claim of substantial time and maybe a cash payment to boot, you want to know what *exactly* you're going to get out of reading it.

Let me be as clear as possible about what benefits you will get by reading *Spotlight* start to finish:

First, you will have an answer to several puzzling questions. If you're a serious reader of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* books, *Spotlight* answers the question, "Why do I like these books so much?" If you're not a fan but someone you know well cannot talk about anything else, reading *Spotlight* will explain to you, "What is my friend (spouse, child) seeing and experiencing in these young adult and vampire adventures that I'm missing?"

Spotlight's answer to these questions is the common sense one but, because it is very much out of step with the answers usually given, I'll share it straight up.

People Love These Books Because They're Good Books.

Not very mysterious, right?

If a book sells millions of copies – and Mrs. Meyer's *Twilight* novels have sold more than 70 million copies to date and will sell probably twice that before the movies are all released – I think the starting point

for the discussion of *why* they are selling so well should be the obvious one: they do what books are supposed to do. The four and one-half novels of the Forks Saga deliver meaning in such a way that readers are engaged, edified, and eager for more.

In brief, the books succeed as books. They are well written, they touch readers in their hearts, and they profoundly confirm and perhaps even re-shape their readers' core beliefs.

Even *Tw*i-hards, the most devout of *Twilight* readers, though, often blush when they admit they love Edward and Bella's adventures. Sad but true, it is something of a given that these books are "trash" or "just for teen girls." Let me explain why, then, I think the idea that Mrs. Meyer is a hack writer and her readers are idiots is nonsensical. However widespread and accepted this idea, it flies in the face of all evidence and experience.

Reading requires effort; longer books require greater and more sustained effort. The *Twilight* novels, at well over 2,000 pages when read beginning to end, represent at least a week's worth of any normal person's reading time. Does anyone, not to mention tens of millions of "anyones," spend that much time with any book that isn't delivering on the promise of a story well told?

I'm confident that American readers of all ages, both sexes, and from every region, would rather have a tooth filled or sleep under the bridge than be compelled (as we were in school, by the violence of "assignments") to read books that mean nothing to us. Mrs. Meyer is not writing schlock, whatever her critics say and believe – even if they *have* convinced most folks and many of her admirers that she has no talent.

The default reasons why readers love specific books and why any book sells very well are that the story is well written, delivers profound meaning in an entertaining way, and that it answers important questions about what it means to be human. These are the working assumptions of *Spotlight* about Mrs. Meyer's Bella Swan novels.

Five Reasons Critics Dismiss *Twilight* and Mrs. Meyer

Why do I think most people don't want to take these novels seriously as literature? Five quick reasons.

Prof. James Thomas of Pepperdine University, author of *Repotting Harry Potter: A Professor's Book-by-Book Guide for the Serious Re-Reader*,

said in a *Time* magazine interview that the reason Ms. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books weren't accepted by scholars as "literature" were "the three 'Deathly Hallows' of these books: they are too current, too popular, and too juvenile."¹

The same is at least as true of Mrs. Meyer's writing. The myopia of academics and media mavens makes them blind to the artistry and wagonload of meaning in genre fiction, i.e., anything other than the "modern novel." Being wildly popular, selling well *today* rather than years ago, and being a hit with younger as well as more mature readers are three strikes to the shadow shaper-umpires in the caves where we live.

Beyond the three "failings" of being commercially successful, accessible to readers of almost all ages, and much loved, Mrs. Meyer herself, by being the person and writer she is, has created two more road blocks to critical acceptance or even serious consideration: she writes Young Adult fiction and she is a married woman and mother who is not ashamed of her religious beliefs. Genre revulsion, institutional misogyny, and what I call "Sarah Palin Syndrome" mean any writer of Mrs. Meyer's description is going to be dismissed and beaten down by our self-anointed cultural gate-keepers.²

Spotlight answers the mystery of the *Twilight* books' popularity with the unjaundiced, common sense view that they are popular because they are good books. By 'good,' I mean they are **deliberately crafted**, they **deliver meaning** well beyond the narrative line, and, via this artistry and allegory, they **delight readers** profoundly.

In the first book about Mrs. Meyer as a writer-to-be-taken-seriously-as-artist, I will look at *Twilight* from two very different critical perspectives. The first and most important part of *Spotlight*, I think, is a reading of the Forks Saga as literature, a reading which reveals the choices Mrs. Meyer made in designing and telling her tales and why these choices work as well as they do.

1 James Thomas, *Time* magazine, Joanne Rowling: Person of the Year (Runner-Up), January 2008; http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1695388_1695436,00.html

2 See Lev Grossman, 'Good Books Don't Need to be Hard,' *Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 2009 on genre and the modern novel (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203706604574377163804387216.html>) and Forks High School professor, 'Twilight and the Future of the Novel,' <http://fhsprofessor.com/?p=233>

Four Ways of Knowing: Four Layers of Meaning

The first benefit we get, then, from reading *Spotlight* is the literary answer to “why are these books so popular?” The second benefit is the practice we get in thinking about what all books mean, both as literature per se and as works of imagination. The first and longer part of *Spotlight* is an exercise in what Northrop Frye called “iconological criticism,”³ which, though it sounds daunting, is really just looking at a story in the four different ways people know things. These ways of knowing anything – as information or data, opinion, knowledge, and as wisdom – when laid over a text are called its surface, moral, allegorical, and anagogical or mythic meanings. A book doesn’t have to be Deuteronomy or be written by Dante to have these multiple layers; it just has to be written by someone human to be read by another human.

We’ll walk through the layers step-by-step, spelling out the choices made by Mrs. Meyer at each level to give her series the “wow” resonance it has with millions of readers.

- We’ll explore the **Surface** of the *Twilight* story first to clarify the fundamentals of the narrative: what effect, individually and taken together, do Mrs. Meyer’s choices in her story formulas and narratives devices have on the reader? We’ll look at Bella as narrator, the narrative drive being a combination of “boy meets girl” Harlequin piece and Blockbuster adventure thriller, and the way Mrs. Meyer joins the genres of Young Adult Romance with Paranormal fiction.
- Next, we’ll unwrap the **Moral** meaning implicit in the surface story, which involves identifying the Gothic touches she uses to deliver postmodern messages about the evils of prejudice and the critical importance of choice.
- Then we’ll look *at* the surface story as a transparency to see the **Allegorical** meaning looking back at us from the other side. Beyond the satirical points Mrs. Meyer scores via zombies in *New Moon* and some pointed Christian Church caricatures in *Breaking Dawn*, the overarching allegory of the Saga is a re-telling of the Garden of Eden story with Edward and Bella playing the parts of God and Man in a Medieval “Everyman Drama.”

3 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, page 10.

- Finally, we'll step *into* the surface story as a translucency to experience its **Anagogical** or transcendent meaning. Here we will discuss the hero's journey, the many circles in the story, the literary alchemy, and the importance of eyes and a "shared vision" or conscience. This is Mrs. Meyer at her best.

Looking at her books on these layers of meaning will uncover Mrs. Meyer's neglected artistry and her answers, both traditional and postmodern, to life's big questions. In the Preface to Part One you will have in hand simultaneously two benefits from this book; it explains in large part the popularity of the Cullen Clan's story while also serving as an introduction for many readers to seeing beneath and within the story-line, a technique they can use to 'get at' the greater meaning and artistry of any book they read.

Reading *Twilight* as a Mormon Woman's Midsummer Night's Dream

Spotlight's first chapters are about what the *Twilight* Saga means to *everyone*, using the most traditional and just-human way of thinking about books to open them up. The second part of this book is quite different. Because of the specific inspiration Mrs. Meyer had to write about Bella and Edward and because of the restricted audience for whom she wrote the first books, *Spotlight* is obliged to read the series using the tools of *dream interpretation* to open their latent and more challenging meaning.

That's just crazy enough to require some extra explanation.

Mrs. Meyer's Cinderella story is almost as well known as Ms. Rowling's but, in case you missed it, here is a very brief re-cap.

On the night of 2 June 2003, Mrs. Meyer had a dream about a young couple in a meadow. The man was a vampire, the woman his girlfriend. He wanted to eat her up, quite literally, but his love for her held him back. The dream was so vivid that, when she woke up, Mrs. Meyer wrote down as much of the dream as she could remember. This scene became the pivotal chapter in *Twilight* and is the heart, not only of that book, but of each book in the series, all of which are Edward and Bella stories and all of which feature meetings and confrontations in mountain meadows.

Twilight, then, began as a dream. The saga's beginning and core is from Mrs. Meyer's unconscious mind. She wrote it out, she has explained

many times, not because she expected to become the author of best-selling books that captivate the imaginations of millions. She wrote the story because she felt she had to, as if she “was guided through that process.”⁴ Her only audience members were a trusted sister and herself, which, inasmuch as her sister is as close to her own reflection in beliefs and ideas as another human could be, confirms she was writing as a psychological exercise and relief rather than for publication.

Serious readers of her books, consequently, I think are obliged to look at the books psychologically.

Let me say right away this doesn’t mean I will be patronizing the author as a disturbed woman with mental issues and “putting her on the couch” to speculate about her sexual frustrations and unresolved issues with mom and dad. Far from it. I don’t know Mrs. Meyer or her psychological history, I have no training in psychoanalysis that would qualify me for that kind of speculation, and I have never asked the woman or read her responses to questions that would make such speculation possible.

We do know, however, *exactly* when Mrs. Meyer had her dream. We know, too, that she is a Latter-day Saint (LDS) or Mormon, that she was raised in this church and considers LDS beliefs normative, and that she graduated from Brigham Young University, the LDS academic Mecca, with a degree in English Literature. And we have the books, the product of her dream’s unconscious material, her deliberate artistry, and no little psychological energy.

Knowing these things and having read her books, I think a serious reading of Mrs. Meyer’s books necessarily involves a close look at:

(1) the summer of 2003 to see what might have inspired a devout

4 See, for instance, her interview with William Morris at ‘A Motley Vision: Mormon Arts and Culture,’ <http://www.motleyvision.org/2005/interview-twilight-author-stephanie-meyer/> in which she said:

In the beginning, I didn’t even know that *Twilight* was going to be a *novel*. I had no expectations or direction. I was just writing because it felt wonderful and because I wanted to see where the story was going. Soon, I was also writing because I’d fallen in love with my characters and I felt like I was neglecting them when I wasn’t writing. I didn’t think of publishing until the moment that I wrote what I knew was going to be the very last line. ... I’m lucky *Twilight* wasn’t a muddled catastrophe, because I had no outline or idea of where the plot would go while I was writing the last half (I wrote from the middle through to the end, and then went back and wrote the beginning until the two pieces matched up). To be honest, I feel like I was guided through that process.

and well-informed American Mormon woman to have the dream she did; and

(2) the books themselves to see how they reflect the manifest and latent meanings of this inspiration.

The second part of *Spotlight*, in contrast with the first part’s exploration of what the *Twilight* Saga means to everyone and anyone, will be about what the Forks adventures mean just to Stephenie Meyer and to people very much like her. Which is to say, to Mormon women.

Not being a Mormon or a woman, how the heck can I know what these books mean to an LDS wife and mother? And why, if you aren’t a Mormon woman, should you care?

Those are fair questions. About my knowing what they mean to a Mormon woman, the truth, right up front, is that I can’t *know*. I can only guess.

I think my guesses are more than a stab in the dark, though, because even a non-Mormon or “gentile’s” familiarity with the *Twilight* novels, the events of 2003, and with LDS history, theology, and culture reveal the books are largely about Mormon issues. The *Twilight* novels are an intelligent woman’s expression of her love for, problems with, and experience of life as a Latter-day Saint.

I’m confident this is not over-the-top speculation for three reasons.

- As C. S. Lewis wrote, “To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds,’ you must draw upon the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit.”⁵ The only real (or unreal, depending on your thoughts about Mormon revelation) “other world” that Mrs. Meyer knows, “that of the spirit,” is the spiritual world of LDS doctrine and understanding. We can safely assume it informs her work.
- If we struggle with that, the author says as much herself. Not only is *The Book of Mormon* the most important book in her life,⁶ but she also shares, point blank, that “I am also a member

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays*, Harvest: New York, 2002 page 12

⁶ **Q:** What book has had the most significant impact on your life?
A: The book with the most significant impact on my life is *The Book of Mormon*. The book with the most significant impact on my life as a writer is probably *Speaker for the Dead*, by Orson Scott Card, with *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier coming in as a close second. http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0316160172/ref=ase_stepheniemeye-20/104-0160833-2386318?v=glance&s=books

of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and that has a huge influence on who I am and my perspective on the world, and therefore what I write....”⁷ And –

- As Edward Anaudin has written, Mrs. Meyer’s books reflect specific LDS teachings about ‘Milk Before Meat,’ Agency, Sexuality and the Law of Chastity, Marriage, Family, Conversion, Harmful Language: Lying, Profanity, and Gossip, Diet and the Word of Wisdom, and Persecution and Tolerance.”⁸

Reading *Twilight* as a Mormon novel is not a stretch, but just common sense. As fantasy fiction written by a faithful LDS believer, what else could her books reflect? Buddhism? Secular humanism? Hardly.

Artist, Apologist, and Apostate: The Mountain Meadows Metaphor

I take the step from “reading *Twilight* as a Mormon novel” to interpreting it as a dream or poem expressing what Mrs. Meyer believes *about* her church because of the LDS relevant events of 2003 and their expression in her stories. In brief, 2003 saw three books published with national exposure and distribution that focused on the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, in which tragedy faithful Mormons in Southern Utah executed more than 120 men, women, and children on their way to California.⁹ All three books paint LDS beliefs and history unsympathetically, to say the least, and as a group their publication caused a strong reaction from and a new awareness of Mountain Meadows in the Mormon community.

7 Originally on her StephenieMeyer.com website biography, since removed, but still posted at various sites online, cf., <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/The-Twilight-Saga/Stephenie-Meyer/e/9780316043120#TABS>

8 Edwin B. Arnaudin. ‘Mormon Vampires: The Twilight Saga and Religious Literacy. A Master’s Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree.’ April, 2008; <http://etd.ils.unc.edu/dspace/bitstream/1901/469/1/Mormon+Vampires+-+The+Twilight+Saga+and+Religious+Literacy.pdf>. See also Eric W. Jepsen, ‘Saturday’s Werewolf: Vestiges of the Pre-mortal Romance in the Stephenie Meyer Twilight Novels’ at <http://www.motleyvision.org/readinguntildawn/ojs/index.php?journal=readinguntildawn&page=article&op=viewFile&path%5B%5D=5&path%5B%5D=24>

9 *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Bagley), *American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857* (Denton), and *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (Krakauer)

That is not the only Mormon crisis or gentile assault on LDS beliefs in 2003 and the years just prior but it is the one most obviously reflected in Mrs. Meyer's dream and books. *Twilight* and the subsequent novels, especially *Breaking Dawn*, are best understood in depth after examining them in the context of the three Mountain Meadows books and the challenge they made to Mormon believers like Mrs. Meyer. I will argue that the Forks adventures are largely her metaphorical response as an LDS artist, as a Mormon apologist, and, significantly, as a feminist apostate.

This involves reading *Twilight* as a wish fulfilling dream in which almost every figure, group, setting, and conflict acts as a story transparency to deliver a sympathetic presentation of core LDS beliefs and a defense of controversial ideas that divide Mormons and their gentile neighbors. Mrs. Meyer's dream answers the objections every intelligent Latter-day Saint knows nonbelievers have about Mormonism in her portrayal of the Cullen vampire clan as her ideal Mormon family (even Father, Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit), the Quileute werewolves as the Salt Lake City Church, and Bella as her idealized Seeker for the restored faith and personal, individual immortality.

She answers in non-discursive images and stories those Americans who believe that:

- Joseph Smith was a fraud and the religion he founded just so much nonsense;
- Man-Child marriage and polygamy are Mormon horrors;
- The Latter-day Saints are a cult rather than a valid means to salvation;
- The Mormons have a 'magic world view,' not a sanctifying means of grace;
- Native American genetic evidence proves *The Book of Mormon* is hooley;
- The Mountain Meadows Massacre was caused by LDS doctrines of blood atonement, by their unquestioning obedience to the first president, and by their group oaths to take revenge for martyred Mormon prophets;
- Mormon men are misogynists and their women little more than slaves;

- Mormons as a rule are patronizing and condescending to non-believers because they think their temple-recommends make them not just a “peculiar people” but “perfect people,” far better than others;
- Mormons believe they can be shamelessly dishonest with potential converts or when speaking with anyone about their church because they are “lying for the Lord” or just giving “milk before meat” to save souls; and
- The Latter-day Saints are racists and homophobes.

On all these points. Mrs. Meyer as a story artist is an able apologist for her religious beliefs. She leaves the reservation, though, on women’s issues, of which Bella is very much aware. Mrs. Meyer goes so far in her fantasy saga to create a wish fulfillment resistance piece for Mormon women in the conclusion of *Eclipse* and the married life of Edward and Bella.

More hauntingly, in Leah, who like Mrs. Meyer has a brother named Seth, she gives us a self-portrait of the thinking Mormon woman in painful isolation because of her independence, intelligence, and will. In Edward’s doubts about the soul and vampire transcendence, she leaves on the table the question of LDS life after death.

I will explore Mrs. Meyer’s dream-epic in three steps.

First, I’ll be obliged, because most readers will be unfamiliar with *The Book of Mormon* and LDS theology, to explain how Mrs. Meyer’s beliefs inform her dream, the way everyone’s conscious way of thinking shapes their sleeping thought.

Then I will review how the *Twilight* Saga is a Mormon’s wish fulfillment exercise that glosses and gilds problematic LDS history and beliefs to put them in the best possible light.

Finally, I will discuss the several points of friction between Mormon practice and postmodern sensibilities where Mrs. Meyer’s wish fulfillment takes the side of feminists and critical gentiles contra the Salt Lake City hierarchs and Temple conventions. Her story significantly reforms the “restored faith.”

So what? Again, good question. This matters to Mrs. Meyer and her sister for obvious reasons. Why, if we’re not Mormon women, should we care?

This is meaningful even if you aren't a Mormon woman or if you do not care to know anything about LDS history and beliefs because seeing how Mrs. Meyer's faith shapes and colors her stories reveals, beyond what we learned from looking at the books as layered texts, why they are so popular.

Getting Beyond the Author: Why Books *Really* Sell

Just as *Spotlight's* iconological look at her books gives us both the theory and experience of reading books beneath the narrative line, so this dream interpretation of her novels helps us practice a psychological, even spiritual perspective in reading. As a rule, I am not a fan or exponent of what C. S. Lewis called the "Personal Heresy," i.e., examining poems, plays, and novels simply as an author's personal or ego excrescence rather than vehicles of artist-transcending meaning.

Reading an author's work psychologically, however, here means something completely different than searching for tit-for-tat correspondences with events from the author's childhood or his or her individual neuroses. What we are after here is the identification and understanding of the "other world" and spiritual beliefs this author is smuggling, intentionally or unconsciously. In this larger meaning, dream interpretation and a psychological reading explain why books sell.

Mircea Eliade wrote that in a secular culture like our own, entertainments, especially novels and films, serve a religious and mythic function.¹⁰ This is an observation I will return to again and again in *Spotlight* as its core premise. Human beings, in brief, have a capacity for spiritual or transcendent experience; deprived of same in a godless and god-denying environment, we seek it where we can find it. Many people find it in their religious community and private devotions. *Everyone* gets it by "suspending disbelief" and skeptical self-awareness when we enter into story.

I have two corollaries to Eliade's "religious function of fantasy" thesis. The first is just the fairly obvious point that the more otherworldly or transpersonal meaning a book or drama has, the more aptly it will fill this religious function, and the more popular it will be (assuming of course the content is artfully presented, the Gospel "smuggled" as Lewis put it, rather than written like a tract or altar call). Think of *The Lord of*

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt: New York, 1957, page 204.

the Rings, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Joanne Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels,¹¹ their relatively transparent and profound Christian content, and their unmatched and enduring popularity.

My second addenda to Eliade is that to resonate profoundly in readers' hearts a work must reflect, either openly or opaquely, some spiritual truth or reality, and, simultaneously, the core beliefs of the historical period in which the readers are living. Ms. Rowling pulled off this conjunction by delivering postmodern themes using alchemical scaffolding and re-animating traditional symbolism from the English literature backlot.

I suggest here that Mrs. Meyer succeeds largely because of her religious beliefs themselves, Mormonism being born in the crucible of the early nineteenth-century, the dawn of Modernism, reflect conventional beliefs about the sovereignty of the individual, the myth of progress, and a faith in visible works rather than grace. Reading psychologically to find the hidden treasure in *Twilight* with our own "seeing-stones", if I may be forgiven an LDS metaphor, will reveal the substance of Mrs. Meyer's writing because it will bring to surface the beliefs, both Mormon and apostate, that give these stories their life and depth.

I close *Spotlight* with a hat-tip to the "For Dummies" guidebooks and their signature finales with my own "Chapter of Tens." In it, I will give a bullet item review of *Spotlight*, point to further reading, fiction and non-fiction, to deepen appreciation of Ms. Meyer's artistry and meaning, and a few "frequently asked questions."

Why I Wrote *Spotlight*: An Invitation

My ambition in writing this introduction has been to give you enough of an explanation of what you can get out of reading this book that you feel compelled to actually read it. I hope as well that I have not said so much that you don't think you need to read further to see if I succeed in delivering what I have promised!

Now that I've said what's in it for you, I'll close this introduction by saying why I have written *Spotlight* and by extending an invitation.

11 See my *How Harry Cast His Spell* for the Christian symbolism and themes of the Potter novels, so well smuggled that many Christians to this day still think of them as demonic or "gateways to the occult."

I have enjoyed the research, reading, and writing I have had to do for *Spotlight* because all of it has taken place at the intersection of what matters most to me, namely, faith, literature, culture, and the discovery of meaning. Mrs. Meyer's *Twilight* books have been exciting to explore since few people, for the five reasons mentioned at the start of this introduction, think they deserve serious reading. This has meant I have had the field of play largely to myself, if, to strain the sports metaphor, the stadium is filled with the millions of serious *Twilight* readers who want to know more about the books they love.

While I do think I am breaking relatively “new ground” here, I know mine will not be the last word. Even I am already putting together another book, *Bella Swan's Bookshelf*, in which I will tour the twelve books whose influence shines through individual *Twilight* Saga stories or the whole series. I know that at least one Latter-day Saint *Twilight* fan, too, is writing her critical exegesis of Mrs. Meyer's novels as the work of a Mormon feminist. My hope is that *Spotlight* fosters the serious critical discussion of Bella's Forks Adventures and moves us past the status quo of dismissal and disdain in which the *Twilight* books are held by serious readers.

As with my explanations of Ms. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the greatest pleasure in talking and writing about the *Twilight* Saga is in the friends I have made in person and online. Most everything you read in the pages that follow are ideas that came about in or were much improved during conversations and correspondence with the internet community at Forks High School Professor (fhsprofessor.com). Thanks to Elizabeth Baird Hardy, Deborah Chan, and Jennifer St. Hilaire for your help and especially for your kindness while correcting my mistakes.

I hope you will join that community's ongoing conversation or write to me at the email address below to let me know what you think of *Spotlight* and to share your questions, comments, and corrections. Thank you for reading *Spotlight* and, in advance, for letting me know what you think.

Fraternally in the love of a good book,

John

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