



Vampires: a force for good or evil?

Is the current craze for 'Twilight'-type books bad for teenagers' brains, or do they help to teach empathy?

BY LUCY TOBIN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

With graphic storylines, dramatic love scenes and gruesome portrayals of vampire life, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels have become required reading for British teenagers. They were thanked for the 5 percent rise in children's book sales recorded last year and are a popular feature of school libraries. But now researchers are investigating whether they are bad for teenagers' brains.

At a conference at Cambridge University last month, neuroscientists and literary, education and media academics came together to investigate whether dark novels such as *Twilight* are affecting children's brains in a worrying way. Maria Nikolajeva, professor of education at Cambridge, who organized the conference, says teens are particularly vulnerable to the power of literature because of their stage of development. "Neuroscience has shown that the adolescent brain is particularly unstable, since during this period we switch from focusing on ourselves towards understanding other people and becoming social beings," she explains.

"All this chemistry makes teenagers confused — as we who have gone through it all know. There's a risk that they might fail to recognize the conservative ideology of the *Twilight* series — like the horrendous gender stereotypes, and conservative family values." Nikolajeva flags up the way leading lady Bella's "only concern is to get a boyfriend and get married — as with all her female friends. And while [Bella's vampire lover] Edward is handsome, strong and smart, she is feminine and silly," she adds. "He makes decisions, she is submissive. Since the brain and mind of an adolescent is unstable, they have problems making decisions and judgments, and quite a vague sense of their own psychological, social and sexual identity. It is then easy to fall victim to something superficially glamorous, like *Twilight*."

The inspiration for the conference — where talks included "What is it about good girls and vampires?" and "My life would suck without you" — came after Nikolajeva tried to interest a psychologist colleague in the role of adolescence in children's literature. She was keen to widen the research into the effect of dark novels, but her colleague responded by saying: "And what might you know about it?" Nikolajeva recalls. "I felt it was high time we — psychologists, sociologists, historians, art educators and literary scholars — learned more from each other." The 70-plus attendees came from 20 different countries and included teen-favorite author Meg Rosoff and American linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath.

But despite teens' vulnerability to literature, the academics also concluded that *Twilight* could be an "excellent training field for understanding how other people think, feel and act," says Nikolajeva. "Through



Scenes from *Twilight*, top and center, and *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*, above. The series of four books on which the movies are based has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide. PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

literature, young people can test situations — including extreme situations — which they, in most cases, fortunately will not be exposed to in real life," she adds. Meyer's books can therefore act as a kind of brain-training for teens.

Many academics believe this issue will become increasingly important as young adult novels become all the gorier, as authors try to out-shock each other. Nikolajeva flags up *The Hunger Games*, the young adult sci-fi trilogy by Suzanne Collins, as "getting bigger than *Twilight*," in part because it is "still darker and more violent and ethically dubious. It is as if writers compete about who can stretch the boundary further still." But she hopes that authors heed the advice of *How I Live Now* author Rosoff, who at the conference spoke about how her own wild adolescence fed into her writing, and warned of adult writers' responsibility when addressing young people, including the idea that "there must always be some hope left, even in the darkest fiction."

The conference also outlined a major benefit of the *Twilight* series and books like them: Neuroscientists said that if certain skills, such as literacy, do not develop properly before adolescence, they may be lost forever. So parents might not want to lock away the books. "It's good for young people to be exposed to narratives of all kinds," Nikolajeva reports. "It would be best if they were exposed to narratives of highest artistic quality — which *Twilight* books are not — but through them they may discover other books."

Nikolajeva adds: "If they read *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights* because the back covers say 'Bella's [*Twilight* protagonist Bella Swan] favorite book,' then that's great. Anecdotal evidence from the peak of Pottermania is that it made children come to the library to ask 'have you got more books?' Also, teenagers get confident through reading a novel of 500 pages, and by writing fan fiction or blogs, they also learn to write. That's a welcome side-effect of *Twilight*."

That's borne out by evidence from librarians, like those of Bexleyheath school, a comprehensive in Kent, who write on its Web site: "Without doubt the most popular book in both libraries is *Twilight*, by Stephenie Meyer. This book has been in continuous demand by all year groups, including members of staff."

And compared to the real world, a dose of escapism may not be such a bad thing, concludes Nikolajeva. "Young people today are well aware of the world around them, with ecological issues, poverty, terrorism, AIDS and so on," she says. "There is no point telling them that the world is a nice place, and young adult fiction, unlike literature for younger children, has always dealt with serious and often dark issues." So *Twilight* looks set to continue its bookshelf domination — at least until the next literary trend comes along.

[TECHNOLOGY]

Twitter goes down and the world falls silent

Once the news hits Twitter, it's alive, but Facebook doesn't feel like the place where news is made

BY CHARLES ARTHUR
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The other evening Facebook followed the First Rule of IT support — turn it off and on again. On Thursday, it was having such huge problems with its network that the only solution, as Robert Johnson, its director of software engineering, explained on Friday morning, was "turning off the site."

Wow. Half a billion people suddenly unable to access the biggest social network in the world.

You didn't notice? Compare it with last Tuesday, when Twitter began to be overrun by a little piece of hacking — so that if you went to the twitter.com site itself, "infected" tweets at first popped up fake warnings; later mutations meant you'd retweet infected tweets just by moving your mouse. Although subsequent analysis shows that it only affected a maximum of 1 percent of users, that's still around 1.45 million accounts hit in two hours, including the White House's spokesman's account.

If you were unworried by Facebook's vanishing, but felt as though you were getting a glimpse into the abyss as the number of tweets beginning "on mouseover=" swarmed in your Twitter timeline, you may just be a media professional.

Why? After all, Twitter is tiny compared with Facebook — 145 million versus 500 million. It doesn't drive as much traffic to sites (though still a substantial and often overlooked amount).

But for people in the media business, it has rapidly — in less than four years — become their peripheral nervous system: It tells you what's going on around the world, or within your sphere of interest; it helps for bouncing ideas around, for staying abreast of what you have to know. Twitter creates its own little cities of specialism and knowledge that don't (unlike Facebook) require you to "befriend" the other person; you can follow pretty much anyone you like.

That has its own benefits: As Steven B Johnson's new book *Where Good Ideas Come From* points out, scientists have discovered that cities spur innovation; the concentration of people and ease of communication explain, for example, why Silicon Valley and Cambridge generate so many tech startups.

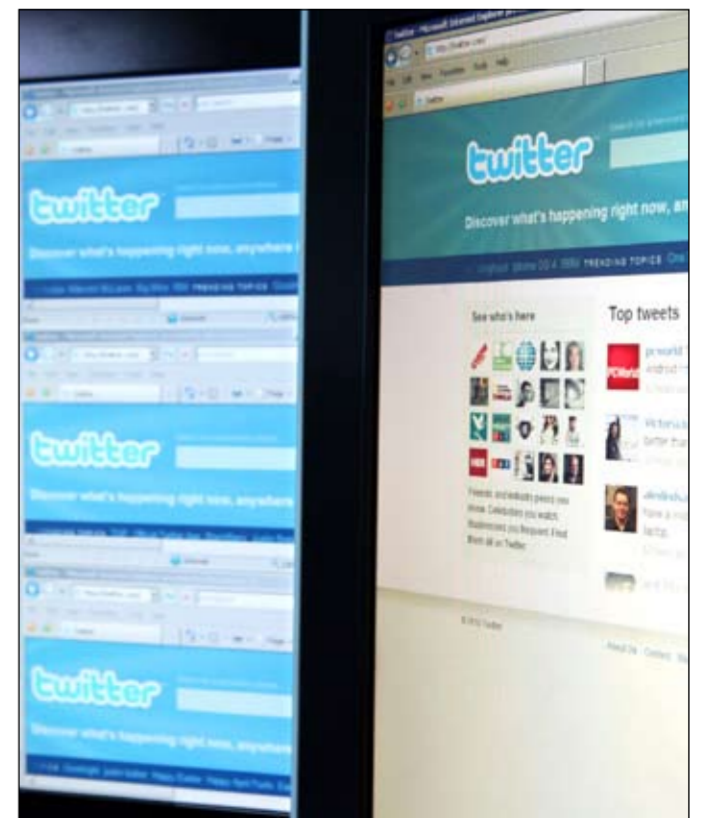
Twitter creates a virtual city and, once you reach a certain level of followers, becomes a quicker way of getting answers and finding out news than almost any other method. (I was tipped off about the person who originated the Twitter hacks via Twitter.) Reporters who once sat glumly watching news wires now watch and comment in carefully curated Twitter search streams. Once you follow a certain number of the "right" (connected) people, it becomes an indispensable news source.

Some people — hello, commenters — will complain that they "don't see the point" of Twitter. Sure, if your job or your business doesn't depend on just-in-time information, or if you find it hard to engage with other people in a supportive way, you're going to find Twitter perplexing.

For news organizations around the world, the moment when Twitter looked as if it was going down the tubes was the one when the real-time news seemed in danger of stopping. And that's already a scary thought; which shows how quickly we adapt. A few years ago these newfangled "blog" things, which could be updated at will, were the cutting edge in real-time. Now the blogs trail galumphing after the Twitter news, held back by the sheer number of words they need to fill them out.

It's not that Twitter makes the news; that still relies on people actually talking to people, or investigating things such as a company's peculiar maneuvers with its pension fund. But once the news hits Twitter, it's alive. Compared with that, Facebook doesn't feel like the place where news is made. Yes, there are lots of people there, and they're making their own news. But it's almost impossible to figure out authority on Facebook, because you have to befriend someone before you can decide if they've got anything useful to say. And if you then "unfriend" them — well, socially it feels uncomfortable. Facebook isn't meant for spreading news; it's meant for linking up people who know each other. News doesn't work that way. News, after all, is often about people you don't know personally but discover you'd like to. Twitter has become news infrastructure; Facebook, by contrast, is where the ads get sold. And journalists know where they'd rather be.

As Chris Sacca, a Silicon Valley investor with money in Twitter, commented: "When Facebook goes down, everyone comes to Twitter to talk about it. When Twitter goes down, the world falls mute."



Twitter came under attack on Sept. 21 as hackers exploited a security flaw to wreak havoc on the microblogging service. Thousands of users were affected by the bug, which automatically sent out or "re-tweeted" messages from a user's account simply by rolling over an infected link with the computer mouse. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG