

## Harry Potter with fangs - and a social network

Heather Green



Chris McElvogue and Georgina Tena created the fan site [Twilighters.org](http://Twilighters.org) Gabriela Hasbun



The Twilight network is so vast that Meyer is losing connection with her teen fans Ellen Barnes

Harry who? A year after J.K. Rowling wrapped up the blockbuster Harry Potter saga, author Stephenie Meyer has booksellers almost ready to forget the brilliant young wizard. Her Twilight books, about the tangled relationship between a handsome vampire and an endearingly ordinary teenage girl, have become reliable smash hits. When *Breaking Dawn*, the last of the four-book series, comes out on Aug. 2, it's expected to surpass all her previous efforts, with an initial print run of 3.2 million copies.

Meyers success isnt due simply to her vivid imagination for vampire romance. She also figured out before almost anyone in the book industry how to connect with readers over the Internet and inspire them to build on her work. Since Meyer published the first Twilight book in 2005, she has reached out to readers on social networking sites, such as MySpace (NWS), and participated in online discussion groups. Fired-up fans have championed her books on Amazon.com (AMZN) and set up their own sites, such as Twilight Lexicon and TwilightMOMS. That has helped propel sales of the series to 7.5 million books. "Other authors have pockets of fans online, but nothing to this extent," says Trevor Dayton, a vice-president at Indigo, Canada's leading bookseller. "Stephenie Meyers Twilight series is the first social networking best seller."

Executives in the book industry have long understood that the Internet can help authors connect with fans, of course. Major releases are usually backed by author videos, a Web site, and interviews with influential book bloggers.

But Meyer, a 34-year-old mother of three from Phoenix, went well beyond standard marketing. She engaged with online readers to answer their most detailed questions about the star-crossed lovers, Edward Cullen and Bella Swan. She put up her own Web site, in addition to the one by her publisher, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, posting her personal e-mail address and family photos. And with Little Brown's help, Meyer threw a real-life prom for her Net fans last year, drawing a huge crowd decked out in flowing vampire capes and fake leg casts in homage to the accident-prone Bella.

Meyer's readers have responded by creating an entire world of Twilight on the Web. Cousins Chris McElvogue and Georgina Tena launched [Twilighters.org](http://Twilighters.org) last year to discuss the books with other readers. Now their site follows every stitch of Twilight news, from plans for book release parties to gossip about the Twilight movie due out in December. The Internet is the best way to connect with other fans, says McElvogue. Twilight has grown into such a sprawling franchise that it has become difficult for Meyer, who declined to comment for this story, to stay as involved online as in the past.

Her success is a rare bright spot in the gloomy book industry. Book publishers have struggled for years as Americans turn to other forms of entertainment, from cable TV to video games. Publishers have responded by cranking out ever more new titles, hitting 411,422 last year, up from 247,777 in 2002, according to researcher R.R. Bowker. Yet industry revenues, at \$41 billion, are barely growing.

With hits increasingly rare, many book publishers suffer from boom and bust cycles. Most major houses live and die by the blockbuster, says Michael Norris, analyst with researcher Simba Information. A publisher's revenue may be up 10% one year and down 10% the next, depending on the performance of just one or two books out of thousands. Scholastic pulled in \$240 million from its Harry Potter franchise in the first quarter after the release of *Deathly Hallows* last summer but saw that figure drop to a mere \$10 million in the most recent quarter.

Now authors are beginning to imitate the online strategies Meyer pioneered in hopes of creating communities of engaged readers. The hits *Freakonomics*, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, and *The Last Lecture* have been backed by similar efforts. "Her success has inspired other authors," says Jennifer Northcutt, fiction buyer at Borders Group, the second-largest U.S. bookstore chain. "They've learned you have to be active online."

Twilight was born on June 2, 2003. As Meyer explained on her site, she woke up that morning after a dream about a striking teenage vampire in a sunny meadow with an ordinary girl. The youngsters were falling in love, but the vampire was torn between his desire for the girl's affection and for her blood. That day, between making lunch and taking her three young sons—ages 1, 3, and 5—to swimming lessons, Meyer wrote 10 pages. After that, she couldn't stop. She moved a desk into the middle of her living room so she could work while her kids played nearby. She wrote late into the night, blasting progressive rock on her headphones.

In those first few weeks, Meyer was exhausted but ecstatic. After graduating from Brigham Young University with an English major in 1995, the stay-at-home mom could never finish the stories she tried writing. Twilight was different. She says she could hear the couple's voices in her head. The writing came easily. The series begins with Bella moving reluctantly to soggy Forks, Wash. She meets Edward on the first day at her new high school. The dangers of their forbidden relationship propel the story. Meyer finished writing in three months. She soon had a \$750,000, three-book deal, a vast sum for a first-time author. (With the millions in royalties since, her husband, an auditor, was able to quit his job recently to look after their kids.)

Marketing for the 2005 book launch started with the standard Net fare. Meyer did interviews with bloggers, and Little Brown created a darkly gothic Web site. But the author thought the site's design didn't fit her personality. So she created the more lighthearted Stepheniemeyer.com. She plastered it with photos of herself and her fans at readings and provided a wry autobiography, with tales of growing up in a Brady Bunch-size family. She also gave bubbly updates on her book tours and peeks into her home life. One photo showed her sons at Halloween, dressed as a Power Ranger, Napoleon Dynamite, and Captain Hook.

Fans were drawn in primarily by their love of the book. The relationship between Edward and Bella may be the stuff of fantasy, but it mirrors the real-life angst and passion of the teenage years. What set Twilight apart was the way teens tracked down fellow readers immediately after closing the books. Within a month of the first book's release, fan sites began to appear. Brittany Gardener started a MySpace group to discuss the book after reading it in one night in December 2006. Her group eventually drew 60,000 members.

Meyer eagerly followed her fans online. She'd never heard of MySpace, but once she discovered Gardener's group, she signed up. She started dropping in, answering fans' questions. ("If Bella ever had a pet, would it be hard for Edward to come around?" "What percent of vampires occupy America?")

Meyer's involvement inspired her fans. Lori Joffs, a stay-at-home mom in Nashville, fell in love with Twilight in early 2006 and began writing a version of the book from Edward's point of view. In February, Joffs posted her rewrite of four chapters at FanFiction.net. Two weeks later, Meyer left a review: "I'm having a great time reading your vision of things." Joffs says she was thrilled and e-mailed Meyer explaining that she wanted to start a Web site to organize the book's facts. Meyer replied that she loved the idea and offered to fill in the characters' backstories. That April, Joffs created Twilight Lexicon, now the most popular fan site, drawing 30,000 daily visitors.

In 2006, Meyer used the Net to meet fans in person. On her Web site, she arranged "I Love Edward" parties, gathering with her readers in libraries and bookstores. Fans began traveling thousands of miles to participate.

Meyer kept trying new ways to reach out to readers. During a book signing in the fall of 2006 for New Moon, the second book, college student Kady Weatherford joked that Meyer should throw a Twilight prom. Meyer relayed the idea to Little Brown, which liked it and helped organize the event. In November, Meyer announced the prom online just ahead of the launch of the third book in the series. The 500-guest event sold out in six hours, prompting the committee to add another prom. It also sold out. On May 5, 2007, fans crammed into an Arizona State University gym. They whooped wildly when Meyer, in a burgundy dress with her dark hair up in ringlets, climbed onstage.

After the release of Eclipse in August 2007, thousands of people started showing up at her signings. Meyer took her e-mail address off her site and kept in touch mainly through exchanges on fan sites. In December she visited TwilightMOMS. "Hi, my fellow moms," she wrote. "It's just so cool that I'm not the only 30+ mom and wife in love with fictional underage vampires and werewolves."

Still, the distance between the superstar author and her Internet fan base is widening. Meyer has two books out this year, Breaking Dawn and The Host, her first adult book. She also consulted on the \$37 million Twilight movie. While Meyer and her publicist keep fan sites in the loop on key events, she can't maintain the close personal contact with readers she used to have. On her blog and MySpace page, the chatty, personal reports have given way to more standard marketing.

And in a major shift, Meyer is asking fans to pull back online. On July 7 she asked the top sites to close their forums three weeks before Breaking Dawn's premiere so that early readers

couldn't spoil the plot by revealing details. Most fans are complying. But some aren't happy. "This seems so incredibly counterintuitive to me," wrote one on TwilightMOMS.

Meyer may have been far ahead of the book industry in building a fan base online. But she doesn't have all the answers to balancing accessibility and fame. "Stephenie is a total sweetheart," says Michelle Vieira, who started trading e-mails with Meyer in 2005. "She was open for fans to talk to. Now it's impossible. She's hugely busy."

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