

## On Campus, Vampires Are Besting the Beats

In 1969, when Alice Echols went to college, everybody she knew was reading "Soul on Ice," Eldridge Cleaver's new collection of essays. For Echols, who now teaches a course on the '60s at the University of Southern California, that psychedelic time was filled with "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," "The Golden Notebook," the poetry of Sylvia Plath and the erotic diaries of Anaïs Nin.

Forty years later, on today's college campuses, you're more likely to hear a werewolf howl than Allen Ginsberg, and Nin's transgressive sexuality has been replaced by the fervent chastity of Bella Swan, the teenage heroine of Stephenie Meyer's modern gothic "Twilight" series. It's as though somebody stole Abbie Hoffman's book -- and a whole generation of radical lit along with it.

Last year Meyer sold more books than any other author -- 22 million -- and those copies weren't all bought by middle-schoolers. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, the best-selling titles on college campuses are mostly about hunky vampires or Barack Obama. Recently, Meyer and the president held six of the 10 top spots. In January, the most subversive book on the college bestseller list was "Our Dumb World," a collection of gags from the Onion. The top title that month was "The Tales of Beedle the Bard" by J.K. Rowling. College kids' favorite nonfiction book was Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers," about what makes successful individuals. And the only title that stakes a claim as a real novel for adults was Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns," the choice of a million splendid book clubs.

Here we have a generation of young adults away from home for the first time, free to enjoy the most experimental period of their lives, yet they're choosing books like 13-year-old girls -- or their parents. The only specter haunting the groves of American academe seems to be suburban contentment.

Where are the Germaine Greers, the Jerry Rubins, the Hunter Thompsons, the Richard Brautigans -- those challenging, annoying, offensive, sometimes silly, always polemic authors whom young people used to adore to their parents' dismay? Hoffman's manual of disruption and discontent -- "Steal This Book" -- sold more than a quarter of a million copies when it appeared in 1971 and then jumped onto the paperback bestseller list. Even in the conservative 1950s, when Hemingway's plane went down in Uganda, students wore black armbands till news came that the bad-boy novelist had survived. Could any author of fiction that has not inspired a set of Happy Meal toys elicit such collegiate mourning today? Could a radical book that speaks to young people ever rise up again if -- to rip-off LSD aficionado Timothy Leary -- they've turned on the computer, tuned in the iPod and dropped out of serious literature?

Nicholas DiSabatino, a senior English major at Kent State, is co-editor of the university's literary magazine, Luna Negra. As a campus tour guide, he used to point out where the National Guard shot students during the May 1970 riot. But the only activism he can recall lately involved anti-abortion protesters and some old men passing out Gideon Bibles. "People think we're really liberal," he says, "but we're really very moderate." Submissions to the lit mag so far this year are mostly poetry and some memoirs about parents. "The one book that I know everyone has read," he says, "is 'I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell.'" So, no uprising unless the bars close early.

Perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. A new survey of the attitudes of American college students published by the University of California at Los Angeles found that two-thirds of freshmen identify themselves as "middle of the road" or "conservative." Such people aren't likely to stay up late at night arguing about Mary Daly's "Gyn/Ecology" or even Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance."

Professor Eric Williamson -- a card-carrying liberal in full tweed glory -- argues that "the entire culture has become narcotized." An English teacher at the University of Texas-Pan American, he places the blame for students' dim reading squarely on the unfettered expansion of capitalism. "I have stood before classes," he tells me, "and seen the students snicker when I said that Melville died poor because he couldn't sell books. 'Then why are we reading him if he wasn't popular?' " Today's graduate students were born when Ronald Reagan was elected, and their literary values, he claims, reflect our market economy. "There is nary a student in the classroom -- and this goes for English majors, too -- who wouldn't pronounce Stephen King a better author than Donald Barthelme or William Vollmann. The students do not have any shame about reading inferior texts."

Roger Kimball, editor and publisher of the *New Criterion*, marches in the other direction -- he has no complaints about the market economy -- but he arrives at the same dismal appraisal of the academic culture. Universities and colleges "enforce an intellectually stultifying, politically correct atmosphere that pretends to diversity," he complains. "One of the results of this is a notable uptick in superficiality and a notable uptick in the anesthetizing of that native curiosity that was once a prominent feature of the adolescent mind."

I want to start humming that classic middle-age rant from "Bye Bye Birdie": "Why can't they be like we were,/Perfect in every way?/What's the matter with kids today?"

But maybe young people's reading choices reflect our desire to keep them young. David Farber, editor of "The Sixties: From Memory to History," says that the way Americans think about the age of maturity has shifted considerably. "There's much more an emphasis now on kids thinking of themselves as kids, even into their early to mid-20s," he says. "But in the '60s, they thought of themselves as agents of historical change. The sit-ins, the civil rights movement, the possibility of being drafted focused the mind. The contagion of protest made everyone think of themselves as possible demonstrators."

That spirit is still alive and well, even if it's not reflected in kids' favorite book titles, according to Mike Connery, who writes about progressive youth politics for the Web site *Future Majority*. He doesn't see a generation of vampire-loving boneheads. "Young people today express their politics in very different ways than they did in the '60s, '70s and '80s," he says. Yes, they love Meyer's "Twilight" series -- even his fiancée is "obsessed" with it -- but that's just for escape. "People don't necessarily read their politics nowadays. They get it through YouTube and blogs and social networks. I don't know that there is a fiction writer out there right now who speaks to this generation's political ambitions. We're still waiting for our Kerouac."

But is anyone really waiting? As young people shift toward the Internet and away from exploring their political activism in books, the blood drains from their shelves. For the Twitter generation, the new slogan seems to be "Don't trust anyone over 140 characters." What you see at the next revolution is far more likely to be a well-designed Web site than a radical novel or a poem. Not to be a drag, but that's so uncool. For those of us who care about literature and think it still has a lot to offer, it's time to start chanting, "Hell, no! We won't go!"

1. Demonstrate evidence of a close reading.
2. What is the author's purpose?
3. Who is the intended audience?
4. In your writer's notebook, write a one page reflection about this article.