

The uneasy censor

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

It feels somehow both quaint and pathologically up to date for my wife and I to be devoting any serious thought at all to the question of whether to allow our 12-year-old daughter to read Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" books. This is the kind of problem that makes parents of my generation feel ancient and overprotective. My wife and I grew up in very different communities, but both of us had the same experience as young readers: Kids read whatever they wanted to read, and their parents had barely an inkling of what they were up to. I went to libraries and used bookstores on my own from an early age, chose what I wanted, and didn't bother to tell my parents about it. They could see, just by scanning the lurid covers of the books I left all over the house, that much of what I read was pulp fiction featuring swordplay and gore, but I appeared to be reading a lot and I was doing all right in school, so they were satisfied. They could perhaps be roused to an opinion about an R-rated movie, but it apparently never occurred to them that it could be their job as parents to decide whether what I was reading was appropriate. I don't remember the word "appropriate" coming up at all when I was a kid. Now it pervades our culture. In fact, my kids are the ones who bring it up, making me feel my own laxness. They see a trailer for a movie and they immediately turn to me and say, "Can we see that? Is it appropriate?" My instinctive -- unspoken -- reaction is, "Get on the T sometime and go downtown and see it and then come back and let me know." Then the 21st-century parental training kicks in and I start formulating an opinion about the movie's appropriateness -- an opinion I don't really want to hold, let alone enforce as official family policy.

In such moments I can feel the social and cultural norms of the age operating on me. Just as it's increasingly common for parents to want to know exactly where their kids are at all times -- it's increasingly rare for kids to walk out the door and disappear all day on their own, returning only for meals, as I did -- it's also increasingly common that parents want to know everything about what their kids are reading, watching, listening to, and otherwise consuming.

And so, the "Twilight" problem. Our daughter very much wants to read these books, but my wife questions the suitability of their heavy-breathing atmosphere, I'm impatient with the catatonically morose heroine who requires a boyfriend's guidance to tie her shoes, and we're both put off by the books' air of having been written by young-adult--bestseller-generating software.

Even so, two strong arguments in favor of giving our daughter the green light will probably prevail. First, readerly enthusiasm is a good thing in its own right, and should be encouraged. Second, and this is the one that convinces me, the best antidote to whatever we don't like about these books is not to forbid her from reading them but to encourage her to read a lot of books of all kinds. The diversity of content and quality she encounters as an eclectic reader will put any one book in perspective.

There are other arguments I'm unmoved by. One I hear a lot is that there's nothing in these books that kids aren't

already seeing ten times over online, on TV, and in the movies – a good reason, in my view, to continue restricting screen time. And then there's my daughter's assertion that every other female human being on earth her age has already read the "Twilight" books. In response to that one, 21st-century parents can avail themselves of two traditional answers that are timeless in their cogency: "But I'm not in charge of every other girl on earth," and "If every other girl on earth was jumping off a cliff. . . ."

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Credit: By Carlo Rotella

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