

"And I'm Going to Get Old"

Age Horror in the *Twilight* Franchise¹

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Twilight, Horror and Non-Aging

Engaging with *The Twilight Saga*³ in an edition subtitled *Old Age in Horror Fiction and Film* draws a connection that might cause offense. After all, many invested in the genre of horror have gone through great lengths to emphasize that Stephenie Meyer's novels (2005–2020)⁴ and the films (2008–2012) they inspired are not to be considered horror. For instance, in 2009 a blog post on *Twilight Sucks* emotionally explains: "Vampires use

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- 2 Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz.
- 3 In the following, *Twilight* is used to refer to the franchise as a whole. When I refer to the series' first installment of the same name, I will specifically address it.
- 4 Stephenie Meyer has published a variety of publications set in the *Twilight* universe, including the novella *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* (2010), *Life and Death* (2015), in which Bella and Edward swap genders, and *Midnight Sun* (2020), a retelling of *Twilight* from Edward's perspective. In this article, I focus on the four key novels of what has been termed *The Twilight Saga: Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008) as well as their adaptations to film.

[sic] to be a cult-following, much like how anime use [sic] to be in the West. Now, it's everywhere, and has lost its meaning. I weep for literature, the underground subcultures, and humanity as a whole for accepting this book with praise" (spirt_mage_234 2009). The quote – and the frustration it expresses – emphasizes a shift from the margins to the center: *Twilight* has amassed a following, drawing attention not only at box offices and book sales but also in fan clubs and conventions,⁵ thus being anything but *niche*. In fact, *Twilight* has moved beyond being a successful series of young adult fiction and has become a household name and a multimillion-dollar franchise.

The story follows first-person narrator Isabella (Bella) Swan's love-triangle with shapeshifter Jacob Black and vampire Edward Cullen and ends with her not only marrying and having a child with the latter but becoming a vampire herself. The franchise's focus on the romantic struggles and the coming-of-age of a teenager appears obvious and resonates with its marketing as young adult fiction, despite being read well beyond the assigned age range of the field.⁶ Yet supernatural elements, most prominently the Gothic figure of the vampire, seem to surpass clear-cut genre distinctions. Anne Morey explains that "Meyer is working with a combination of low-status genres – the vampire tale, the romance, the female coming-of-age-story" (2012: 2). Even so, *Twilight* intersects pop cultural references with canonic literary fiction, for instance, when using *Jane Eyre*'s Edward Rochester as inspiration for the vampire Edward (Valby 2009). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the series also elicited interest in the subgenre that gives credit to its key ingredients: the paranormal ro-

5 *Twilight* has aptly been called a "Pop Culture Phenomenon" (Anatol 2011) and Melissa Click et al argue that "[d]espite its dismissal, the female-oriented *Twilight* franchise is comparable in profit and cultural impact to other well-respected media-franchises [...]" (2010: 6).

6 For further reference on *Twilight*'s readership beyond the market of young adults, refer to Leslie Paris: "Fifty Shades of Fandom: The Intergenerational Permeability of *Twilight* Fan Culture".

mance.⁷ However, the vampire had already seized centerstage in the pop cultural realm before the publication of *Twilight*. Anne Rice's works or Charlaine Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013) exemplify vampires' potential to sell books and be adapted into film, with the former inspiring both the star-studded film *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and an adaptation into an eponymous television series (2022), and HBO basing *True Blood* (2008–2014) on the latter. The vampire thus occurs in a variety of forms and genres and Nina Auerbach explains that "there is no such thing as 'The Vampire'; there are only vampires" (1997: 5).

Yet be they desirable or repulsive, burn in the sun or merely sparkle, vampires share a common feature: They do not age. Their non-aging turns them into a compelling point of reference for aging studies, as Sally Chivers explains in her discussion of aging and *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*:

Across traditions, vampires are typically immune to death from old age, maintain their age appearance from the time they were changed from humans into demons [...] As such, they offer an intriguing figure through which to separate a significant contemporary marker of old age – appearance – from a value that contemporary culture often ignores in older adults – experience. (2016: 89)

Here, Chivers remarks on vampires' capacity to present age via experience rather than physical markers, thereby allowing for a thorough discussion of age beyond physical change. As such, even though the vampire can be read as "old," they do not necessarily instill fears of dying as Auerbach contends: "Eternally alive, they embody not fear of death, but fear of life: Their power and their curse is their undying vitality" (1997: 5). The figure of the vampire is tied to ennui, with immortality showcasing the meaningfulness of the fleeting human lifespan – and in extension, granting value to aging.

7 For further reference on the sub-genre of paranormal romance see Joseph Crawford: *The Twilight of the Gothic?: Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance*: 6.

The vampire's non-aging gains further significance when read in the framework of their desirability. The attraction of the vampire was certainly not invented in Meyer's novels and is already suggested with Count Dracula entering women's bedrooms in Bram Stoker's constitutive work (1897). In Meyer's novels and in their adaptations, however, the desirability of the vampire lies at the core of the narrative as Bella and audience alike are invited to be humbled by the Cullens' beauty and grace. Here, age plays a significant role because youth and attractiveness are intricately linked throughout the series. Considering, for instance, Bella's reaction to Edward stating that he is over one hundred years old: "Well, maybe I shouldn't be dating such an old man. It's gross. I should be thoroughly repulsed" (Weitz 2010: 00:05:37). Her statement is followed by a lingering kiss and the sentiment's ironic nature is immediately revealed: Bella is far from being repulsed by Edward and their attraction is deliberately opposed to dating someone who would appear physically "old." Clearly, the vampire's non-aging intersects with his attractiveness, a connection that is crucial to all vampires depicted in the franchise. As Bella reminds her audience constantly of Edward's otherworldly appearance, to her, he is literally "a young god" (Meyer 2005: 299), his desirability cannot be separated from his apparent youth. The vampire, then, appears as a foil of glorified beauty set against Bella's aging human nature.

In the following, I further investigate the role of (non-)aging in the *Twilight* series and propose aging – not dying – as the true source of horror in both novels and their adaptations. This notion will be exemplified by two points of reference: A first part investigates Bella's unwillingness to grow older than Edward's seventeen years, and a second part discusses their daughter Renesmee's accelerated aging as a mirror of Bella's initial fears. Hereby, I aim at showing that *Twilight* introduces a heroine who is very much willing to die – but not to age. In effect, the series employs the vampires' arrested aging as an antidote to the horror of human aging and promotes internal maturation as a means to maintain both the stability of traditional social roles and the desirability of the seemingly young body.

"My wasted cheek": The Horror of Turning 18

Aging studies have underlined the ties between an aversion towards older age and a fear of death, with Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow using the analogy of old age as a "waiting room" in which people bide their time until they die" (2011: 18). Julia Velten further develops the metaphor and draws attention to the waiting room as a site of transition, thus signifying a "belonging nowhere" (2022: 24). Bella, who is witness to Edward's youthful perfection, already perceives herself in this waiting room at the age of seventeen. She remarks: "I'm dying already. Every second I get closer, older" (Hardwicke 2009: 01:46:48). Here, the vampire becomes an antidote to the fate of every human life and Bella's comment reveals a desire to avoid death and illness. Hereby, *Twilight* imagines an escape from the frailty of human life, as a remark by Anna Silver suggests: "As a breast cancer survivor, I found myself, as I read, wistfully longing for the possibility of my husband and I living forever in bodies that, unlike human bodies, do not age and sicken with disease" (2010: 137). Read in the context of human frailty, Bella's desire to become a vampire and to non-age illustrates a fear of death, however, her constant willingness to sacrifice herself points in another direction.

While Bella is deeply opposed to aging, her willingness to die is repeatedly emphasized in both novels and films. The desire to self-sacrifice is already established in the opening lines of the first film: "I'd never given much thought to how I would die, but dying in the place of someone I love seems like a good way to go" (Hardwicke 2009: 0:22). From the outset, Bella's path is connected to martyrdom, and she repeatedly establishes her firm belief that the most she can do is die for someone. For instance, she stabs herself to help Edward in his fight against Victoria (Meyer 2007: 488) and offers herself to a bloodthirsty vampire in an effort to save her mother (Meyer 2005: 375). Accordingly, Bonnie Mann explains that Meyer's novels "resurrec[t] the promise that a meaningful life comes *through* [emphasis in original] self-annihilation in the interest of others . . ." (2009: 144), and Bella's actions have been perceived to "embody Victorian values of female sacrifice for men" (Rocha 2014: 268). Fittingly, Brendan Shea links Bella's desire for immortality to her wish to

care for her surroundings, “as her eventual death will prevent her from being there to protect and guide the people she loves” (2009: 80). Yet her clearly gendered willingness to die also suggests that Bella’s desire to become a vampire and to non-age is not merely motivated by a fear of dying, but of aging. In the following, I want to draw attention to Bella’s eighteenth birthday to illustrate this reading.

Turning eighteen is a rite of passage and bears legal significance: In the state of Washington, where *Twilight* is set, people reach adulthood at eighteen. While others might celebrate such an occasion, Bella is appalled by turning eighteen in the series’ second installment, *New Moon* (2006). Her “dread” at reaching the age (Meyer 2006: 6) is, naturally, related to Edward’s non-aging, his eternal seventeendom. In a conversation with his sister, Alice, this notion is exemplified:

“What’s the worst that could happen?” She meant it as a rhetorical question.

“Getting older,” I answered anyway, and my voice was not as steady as I wanted it to be.

Beside me, Edward’s smile tightened into a hard line.

“Eighteen isn’t very old,” Alice said. “Don’t women usually wait till they’re twenty-nine to get upset over birthdays?”

“It’s older than Edward,” I mumbled. (Meyer 2006: 9)

Bella’s response to her imagining “the worst that could happen” establishes the underlying significance of aging in the series: The worst that could happen to Bella is “getting older”. Alice’s response is interesting in two regards, firstly, she situates Bella’s fears against normative readings of age and, by suggesting that eighteen is still considered young, establishes that age operates within cultural frameworks. Secondly, she grants aging a specific gendered dimension as it is “women” who usually start worrying about their age before turning thirty. This notion is further underlined in the novel’s filmic adaptation in which Emmet, Edward’s brother, remarks at Bella’s birthday party: “Dating an older woman, hot” (Weitz 2010: 00:13:23). As Susan Sontag has famously asserted with her “double standard of aging,” aging cannot be sepa-

rated from gender and impacts women harder than men (1972: 29). As Sontag emphasizes, this double standard is also closely entwined with female appearance and has a specifically aesthetic dimension (*ibid*: 31). Accordingly, Bella's desire to non-age hinges upon Edward's youth as an integral part of his attractiveness and she refuses to be immortalized as "a wrinkled little old lady" (Meyer 2006: 9). Clearly, youth is associated with beauty and power, while an aged appearance makes the imagined older Bella appear "little." Obviously, Bella wants to live with her partner forever, yet forever is appealing only in a body deemed young and, in effect, desirable.

This image of the visibly aged body as undesirable is prominently introduced in *New Moon*'s opening, when Bella dreams of herself as an aged woman next to Edward's unchanged image. In her dream, Bella looks at her grandmother, only to realize to her utter horror that she is encountering herself in a mirror:

With a dizzying jolt, my dream abruptly became a nightmare. There was no Gran. That was *me* [emphasis in original]. Me in a mirror. Me – ancient, creased, and withered. Edward stood beside me, casting no reflection, excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen. He pressed his icy, perfect lips against my wasted cheek. "Happy birthday," he whispered. (Meyer 2006: 6)

Bella's dream presents older age as a state of fearful decay and Ashley Benning explains that "now, Bella reveals her true concern: aging, and all that it entails" (2014: 91). In this regard, Benning fittingly speaks of Bella's "age phobia" and emphasizes that her "interpretation of aging includes illness, helplessness, senility, and becoming unattractive to Edward" (*ibid*: 91). In this scene, the difference between the non-aging vampire and decaying human could not be clearer: Whereas Edward's lips remain "perfect," Bella's cheek is "wasted." It is interesting to note that while Edward still appears as Bella's companion, he merely kisses her cheek in the novel, and in the film, he only brushes his lips to her hand (Weitz 2010: 00:03:04). Apparently, aged Bella does not receive a passionate kiss on the lips from the still-young vampire, rather, their relation-

ship is established in almost asexual terms. Given that *Twilight* prominently features Bella's sexual desire for Edward, her threat of aging thus also equals a fear of sexual unattractiveness.

Hereby, the dream emphasizes that change is brought forth by age, so much so that Bella does not recognize herself: The aging self becomes someone else, someone unrecognizable. This foreignness relates to Margaret Morganroth Gullette's engagement with children reacting to "aged" versions of themselves at the Boston Science Museum. Gullette asserts that after encountering the virtually aged image shown on screen, "[t]he children were almost uniformly shaken" (2005: 4). The horror created by the distorting mirror appears reminiscent of Bella's despair upon realizing that she sees herself, rather than her grandmother. The feeling of not-self that Bella describes presents the aged self as abject, foreign and ultimately other.

Bella's dismay about her birthday, then, signifies her deep-seated horror of aging, a horror that is instilled by Edward's non-aging, and establishes the relational nature of age, namely that "[i]t always *takes two to age* [emphasis in original]" (Kunow 2011: 24). Bella's birthday turns her into an adult and further sets her apart from Edward whose seventeen years not only make him eternally adolescent but also relate to reading seventeen as a sexually desirable yet possibly still forbidden age.⁸ Even though the vampire himself denies the reading of age as decay and constantly encourages Bella to stay human, he remains "perfect," the antithesis of Bella's fate of being "wasted" in older age. It thus appears that Bella is not merely afraid of dying, if dying young is an option – rather, she is afraid of dying *old*.

8 The age of seventeen has been featured at the intersection of adolescence and adulthood in a variety of forms in the pop cultural realm, for instance, in "17" Kings of Leon sing "Oh, she's only seventeen," indicating sexual desirability but also the forbidden nature of being a minor.

"Growing too fast": Renesmee's Accelerated Aging

In *Breaking Dawn* (2008) Bella finally becomes a vampire and one might expect her horror of aging to be over – yet, her fears take on a new form because her daughter, Renesmee, ages at an accelerated rate. In the following, I want to further investigate the role of Renesmee's accelerated aging and suggest that her aging is conceptualized in two distinct ways: in utero, it is read as uncontrollable growth and causes horror; once Renesmee is born, it is presented as maturing and creates a sense of wonder. Moreover, Bella's worry about her daughter's aging mirrors her previous fears and further strengthens the ties between female characters and a horror of growing older.

The fact that Renesmee grows at an accelerated speed is introduced in the moment that Bella realizes that she is pregnant. Only five days after her supposed menstruation, Bella begins to feel the fetus within her, a fact she deems "[i]mpossible" (Meyer 2008: 115). Yet, still in utero, the fetus grows rapidly, too rapidly for the human maternal body to accommodate and soon Bella's bones are broken from the inside (ibid: 294). The pregnancy alters the narrative's focus on the love triangle, a shift that is also expressed in form as Jacob becomes an interim narrator. His focus on Bella's withering body, her "mottled stomach" (ibid: 182), his assessment that "[y]ou'd think she was already dead" (ibid: 222) is mirrored in the film version's portrayal of Bella taking a bath with her skeletal body prominently displayed (Condon 2011: 01:13:39). These changes resonate with previous depictions of an unknown fetus as a source of horror, famously illustrated in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). In Bella's case, the fetus appears horrifying primarily because of its incompatibility with the maternal body and its exceeding strength and growth. A conversation between Jakob and Edward, narrated by the former, underlines the link between the fetus' unknowable nature and its growth:

"The thing is ... growing. Swiftly. I can't be away from her now."
 "What is [emphasis in original] it?"
 "None of us have any idea. But it is stronger than she is. Already."

I could suddenly see it then – see the swelling monster in my head, breaking her from the inside out. (Meyer 2008: 167–68)

To both shape shifter and vampire the horror associated with the unborn is prominently linked to its growth: It turns the fetus into “the thing” and a “swelling monster”. This link between Renesmee and the monstrous is repeatedly underlined, for instance by the werewolves who deem the fetus “[u]nnatural. Monstrous” (Meyer 2008: 183) and plan on killing the half-vampire as they “don’t know what kind of creature the Cullens have bred, but [they] know that it is strong and fast-growing” (*ibid*: 184). Again, the fetus’ accelerated maturation serves as the basis for skepticism and horror. As a half-vampire, Renesmee’s nature appears utterly unknown, yet it is her growth that immediately identifies her as dangerous.

Once Renesmee is born, the horror her surroundings feel is soon replaced by a sense of wonder. Now, references to the monstrous, as suggested by her nickname “Nessie,” appear humoristic rather than chilling. At the same time, her developments are no longer framed as uncontrolled growth, rather she is presented as growing into maturity (*ibid*: 549). Lisa Nevárez accordingly understands her as “balancing between the innocent child and the startlingly mature one” (2013: 113) and explains that Renesmee “looks like a child and can do childish things but who contains a very adult nature” (2013: 117). Even though the Cullens are still continuously surprised by her development, her growth – or maturation, as it is now called – no longer instills a sense of threat. Compared to his previous assessment of the fetus as “the thing … growing,” Edward now describes Renesmee’s development as a source of wonder: “She’s intelligent, shockingly so, and progressing at an immense pace. Though she doesn’t speak – yet – she communicates quite effectively” (Meyer 2008: 397). While previously, Renesmee’s aging was predominantly linked to “growth” – as a physical characteristic –, it is now framed in the terms of “progress” and relates to her intelligence. Renesmee thus becomes, as Benning notes, “almost a peer to her aunts and uncles” (2014: 93) and her chronological age of a few months is surpassed by her maturity. While the fetus’ “growth” presented cause for concern in relation to Bella’s body,

Renesmee's "progress" presents a threat to herself. It is her accelerated aging, and the entailed possibility of her premature demise, that triggers the family's worry and connects to Bella's already established "age phobia" (ibid: 91).

As Bella worries about her daughter's lifespan, she also revisits her deep-seated fears of aging and frames older age as the ultimate form of human decay. Accordingly, she understands her daughter's accelerated age process in terms of fixed phases:

By Carlisle's calculations, the growth of her body was gradually slowing; her mind continued to race on ahead. Even if the rate of decrease held steady, she'd still be an adult in no more than four years. Four years. And an old woman by fifteen.

Just fifteen years of life. (Meyer 2008: 490)

Again, a teenager's life is assessed with reference to aging, and again, becoming "an old woman" appears as a nightmarish scenario. While Bella's fear of aging prominently relied on Edward as a foil of eternal youth, Renesmee's aging is opposed to what her mother expects and to what can be assumed to be "normal" aging. As such, Bella's shock about being "an old woman by fifteen" relies on cultural framings of adolescence contrasting older age. These frames gain further significance against the backdrop of Bella's immortality: Read in this context, Renesmee's aging appears as a distorted mirror of her mother's previous fears. Even though her accelerated aging might present her as utterly different from the rest of her family, it still functions as a metaphor for the progressing human lifespan. Her aging, then, serves as the ultimate reminder of human frailty and presents Renesmee not only as different, but also as hyper-human. With her daughter, Bella's nightmare of turning into her grandmother has returned: She imagines her daughter old and – as we may conclude from her previous reading of her own aged body – "wasted."

Despite her immortality, undeniable beauty and eternal youth, aging thus again presents the sole opponent in Bella's life. As she explains in voice-over: "It seemed like we only had one enemy left: Time. Renesmee was growing too fast" (Condon 2012: 29:34). Aging is framed

as the “enemy” that stands in the way of the young family’s happiness, and the importance granted to time is tied to the changes it instills in Renesmee, who grows “too” fast. Here, Renesmee’s aging is pathologized, a notion also prominently suggested by Carlisle’s studies of her development. It is unsurprising that the changes brought by the “enemy time” are unsettling to Bella who comments after not seeing Renesmee for a night: “Abruptly, something close to panic had my body freezing up. What would she look like today?” (Meyer 2008: 450). Her accelerated aging turns Renesmee into an Other: Reminiscent of her reaction to her aged image in the mirror, Bella is afraid of what her daughter’s aged version might look like. While Renesmee’s maturity is thus appreciated, her aging is a source for “panic” and Bella explains: “The thought of Renesmee’s speeding life had me stressed out again in an instant” (*ibid*: 451). Similarly, watching an animated growth-spurt, the film’s audience is invited to follow Bella’s line of thought and to wonder just how long the child might live (Condon 2012: 29:34). Following Xavier Aldana Reyes’s understanding that “[h]orror takes its name, in other words, from the effects that it seeks to elicit in its readers” (2016: 7), the horror presented here is that of aging.

In conclusion, Renesmee’s aging is presented along different frames of meaning-making: it instills both threat and fear, but contrastingly, when read as maturation, her aging is also commendable and marks her as non-threatening. In fact, Renesmee’s aging, or her becoming mature, is vital to the Cullens’ defense against the Volturi and to their attempt to prove that she is not an immortal (and full-vampire) child (Meyer 2008: 549). In this instance, her aging – and the ties to humanity it signifies – is key to her survival. In the case of Renesmee, aging moves beyond presenting the horror it did to her mother, even though this reading is still apparent. More specifically, her not behaving childlike, and thus not “acting her age,” makes it acceptable that she will eventually stop aging.

Conclusion: The Vampire as an Antidote to Horror

What, then, can be gleaned about aging as horror in *Twilight Saga*? As Bella's fear of aging suggests, signs of older age create a sense of horror in the young heroine who deems herself "wasted" next to Edward's perfection – and eternal youth. At first glance, Renesmee's accelerated aging appears as a mirror of these fears given that Bella's aging is replaced by fear for her daughter's life.

Yet Renesmee also illustrates that maturation creates a sense of wonder rather than horror and thereby exemplifies a correct timeframe to stop aging: A timeframe that neither includes childhood nor older age. In fact, while older age is linked to decay, childlike behavior is repeatedly dismissed as undesirable, considering, for instance, Edward calling Jakob "a pup" when annoyed with him (Meyer 2007: 303). Here, the divergence between what can be understood as experienced age and chronological age comes to the fore, an opposition that Benning addresses by speaking of "physically mature but emotionally stunted wolves, or the intellectually mature but physically stunted vampires" (2014: 92). In fact, Bella only perceives Jakob as "plenty mature" once she allows her romantic feelings for him (Meyer 2007: 520). Youth, when read as immaturity, remains undesirable and possibly even dangerous, as is showcased in the threat posed by immortal children. Maturation, in contrast, is presented as highly commendable, as suggested by the protagonist Bella who was "born thirty-five years old" (Meyer 2005: 91), is emotionally mature and in effect takes care of both of her parents.⁹ If Bella was to be considered childish, as, for instance, the clichéd teenager Jessica, she would neither be a fitting mate for Edward nor appear mature enough for immortality.

Twilight suggests, then, that the right time to become a vampire and to escape the horrors of aging occurs at the intersection of emotional maturation and youthful attractiveness and sexual desirability. While their stunted aging might transgress notions of age-appropriateness, the societal functions the Cullens perform clearly adhere to age tropes: They finish high school repeatedly, they are all matched in heterosexual

9 For further reference on Bella's role as a caregiver see Silver: 124.

relationships and not only perform the roles of siblings and parents, rather, they understand their ties as familial. Fittingly, Benning explains that they “have created a system to mimic that of a mortal family” (2014: 95). In conclusion, they are stunted at the time they can best contribute to their community, be it economically – they are constantly buying cars and clothes – or socially, with Carlisle being a doctor. The horror that *Twilight* elicits of older age thereby resonates with readings typically associated with “senior citizens”: Aside from unattractiveness, it alludes to not contributing to society. Thus, *Twilight*’s vampires oppose the horror of aging in two distinct regards: They not only promise eternal beauty, but on a societal level, they counter fears of “aging populations” and what has been called “a silver tsunami” (Rotman 2019).

In the series’ end, the horror of aging ceases to have a hold on Bella as she fully grasps that her daughter will stop aging, too. It is only then that *Breaking Dawn* concludes with a chapter titled “The Happily Ever After” and leaves the couple in their cottage in the woods. In German, fairytales do not end on “happily ever after,” they conclude with: “Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie noch heute,” which translates into “and if they have not died yet, they are still alive today.” While this fairytale ending interweaves the happy end with the possibility of death, *Twilight* allows for the ultimate “Happily Ever After”: Bella and Edward do not have to die – even better – they do not have to age.

Author Bio

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