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Vampires turn gentler with eye toward teen girls

By Jill Serjeant
Reuters
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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Girls these days can't seem to get enough of dark, mysterious strangers -- especially if they have fangs and drink blood.

The age-old vampire genre is finding a new audience among angst-ridden teenage girls with romance on their minds, and as a result, the horrific undead are changing into kinder, gentler creatures who often curb their thirst for fresh, young blood.

Dark, dashing and brooding, today's young male vampires have a special allure for young women that goes beyond the escapist, fantasy appeal that the genre enjoyed for decades, and Hollywood is rushing to take advantage of it.

"There is something about a man who lurks in the dark", said actress Nina Dobrey, who plays high school student Elena Gilbert in the September TV series "The Vampire Diaries".

The show will air on the young female-oriented CW network with the promotional line "Love Sucks."

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And the CW isn't the only media company getting in on the act. HBO's "True Blood" has become a darling of TV critics, and last year's hit vampire movie "Twilight" has spawned the sequel "New Moon" in theaters this fall.

"There is the appeal of the forbidden -- of 'who's that mysterious boy in my class'," said Richelle Mead, author of the best selling young adult book series "The Vampire Academy", which has been translated into 22 languages.

"There are also plenty of teens who feel that people don't quite understand them, and here is the other who is not quite

the norm. That is very attractive," Mead told Reuters.

Stephenie Meyer's young adult romance novel "Twilight" has sold some 17 million copies, and fans of shy 17-year-old Bella Swan and outsider vampire Edward Cullen helped the movie bring in \$383 million at global box offices.

VEGETARIAN VAMPIRES

"Twilight" vampires call themselves vegetarian because they only drink the blood of animals, and the fanged ones on "True Blood" have managed to integrate themselves into human society by drinking a synthetic blood substitute, called Tru Blood.

"You can't have a teen girl falling in love with a total monster," said Mead, whose books feature a non-killing race of vampires that exist alongside a more evil subset.

"They had to become a little more accessible versus the vampire movies of the 20th century, when they were quite gruesome. It's a safe scary," she said.

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Compared to old-school vampires, as in Bela Lugosi's classic 1931 movie "Dracula," modern bloodsuckers have complex relationships and emotional entanglements -- often sexless -- with the objects of their desires, said Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo.

Julie Plec, executive producer of "The Vampire Diaries" which is based novels of L.J. Smith and set in a high school, said young women want to believe vampires have "epic amounts of knowledge and soul and spirituality and intelligence lurking behind those eyes."

"So in a vampire, just by definition, you are getting the bad boy with the brain," Plec told reporters recently.

But older vampire fans have not warmed to the sensitive undead currently stalking bookshelves and airwaves. "Some people get quite vicious about it. They consider they have been ruined. They see vampires as being bastardized," said Mead.

Still, all hope is not lost. Although teen girls are dying to see the "New Moon" sequel to "Twilight" in November, the 2010 movie "Priest" is a dark action flick about a vampire-slaying priest and October sees the release of thriller "Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant."

(Additional reporting by Laura Isensee; Editing by Bob)

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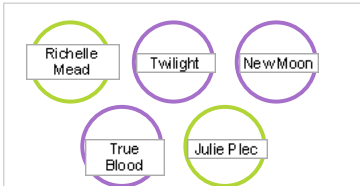
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