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California State University's Dr. Natalie Wilson Discusses 'Twilight' College Course, Quileute Tribe and White Privilege

Is it Wrong that the Quileute Tribe Wasn't Asked Permission About 'Twilight' Books?

By Shamontiel L. Vaughn

With so many Twi-Hards, Twi-Moms and Twi-Teens, it may be surprising to find that there's still one seat left in the class of 39 at California State University's "[Topics in Women's Studies: Twilight: The Text and the Fandom](#)" course. The instructor, Dr. Natalie Wilson, is the author of the 2011 book "[Seduced by Twilight](#)" and a five-year professor at CSU. In between classes, she took time to speak with AC's Arts & Entertainment Contributor Shamontiel, about the purpose of the course, why the "Twilight" books were chosen as the focus and what students should learn from the Special Topics course.

S: Why were you seduced by "Twilight"?

NW: If I was seduced, it was kind of forced seduction. My daughter wanted to read the series. She was in fifth grade at the time, and I didn't want her to read it at the time because I'd heard various things that made me a little concerned about somebody in fifth grade reading the series. I started reading it with her and then as I did thought, "Wow, there's really something here to look at" so thanks to my daughter is how I got into all of this.

Shamontiel: It's not unusual to have courses based on authors or books, from [Langston Hughes](#) to Shakespeare to [Walt Whitman](#) and so forth, but what made California State University want a course based on the "Twilight" series?

Dr. Natalie Wilson: It was basically instigated by myself, and that's because I just submitted a book that's coming out in the summer called "[Seduced by Twilight](#)." And I'm a women's studies and a literature faculty member so I tend to teach in the two departments and combine the interests of both disciplines. I had worked on a master's thesis as an adviser for "Twilight." Last year, while writing the book, I had gone on to a number of academic conferences and I saw the interest was really growing not only in popular culture but also in academia.

I just came across some really interesting material, and I knew there were some anthologies coming out. I spent a year writing my own book on the saga, and I felt that it deserved academic attention rather than—especially on the Internet—lots of the blogs, although they started out more analyzing the series and talking about the impact, they've really—many of them—have gone to sort of celebrity blogs where they cover Rob Pattinson and Kristen Stewart and fan events. There's not that much critical dialogue going on anymore. I was sad to see that go away because all of the events that I've attended, and I've gone to some of the [TwiCons](#) and the film premieres, fans are really anxious to analyze the series. I think the mainstream media has tended to represent fans as if they're just these shrieking Rob Pattinson, Jacob Taylor Lautner crazy girls. I found when I talked to fans they want to talk about the series and analyze it and consider the deeper meaning, not just shriek over Jacob's abs.

S: Do you think that even though the people who are Team Jacob or Team Edward might be focused on the celebrities that that can also backpack on getting them to be interested in reading the books? Can it work the other way around?

NW: Yes, definitely, and also just because of how popular vampires are right now. There's "[True Blood](#)" and "[Vampire Diaries](#)," and so it's more than just "Twilight." I have people who are in the class right now who weren't fans at all. They might have read part of a book or seen one movie and then they're taking the course and finding, "Oh, there's more to this than I thought." Then conversely I have people who were hardcore fans who loved everything about it (and) didn't see any problems, and they're also saying, "Oh, well not everything is perfect about this text or this cultural phenomenon." So I think people—wherever they start on the spectrum—I think there's things that they learn from looking closer at the text. Not only the text but also the cultural phenomenon.

S: What I found interesting while looking at the [California State University's lineup](#) for classes is there's also an American Indian course for another Special Topics course. You mentioned how interested people are in vampires. Will your course also talk about the Quileute ([pronounced Quill-lee-yoot](#)) tribe?

NW: Definitely. We've already talked about that, and I have some published work that's out that's a representation of the

Takeaways

- "I found people of color are not represented that positively."
- "Mormons have a particular history with Native American people that to me is in the saga."
- "There wasn't permission to use those Quileute stories."

Quileute. That's one of the areas of the saga that I find problematic because I've been at many events where the fans assume things about the Quileute indigenous people from the "Twilight" books. Of course most people have never heard of the Quileute. They're a very small nation. I think there's only about 700 surviving members.

(Editor's note: According to QuileuteNation.org, there were 700 enrolled members on March 1, 2005. The headquarters is in La Push, Washington.)

All they know is from "Twilight." They assume there's a werewolf myth in the Quileute legend, which there isn't. There's legends about wolves but nothing to do with werewolves. I talk about the fact that it's problematic that the text uses an indigenous nation without their permission and also presents (Quileutes) not completely negatively but not as glowingly as the Cullen vampires. Sam is a domestic abuser. They're presented as fairly violent, not able to control when they change into wolves. It's created a lot of problems. On the one hand, the Quileute have economically benefited from it, and also it's giving them attention, which any nation that is about to basically go extinct likes to have attention. But, on the other hand, it's not really presenting them in the best way. I would link it somewhat to the western film genre where Native Americans, indigenous people, were presented in a kind of stereotypical way. "Twilight" is an improvement on that, but yet again it's not perfect. As far as the research I've done and the Quileute people I've talked to, there wasn't permission to use those stories.

S: Tell me a little bit about how race and white privilege will be discussed in the course because for the most part I didn't see too much race conflict in the book. How will that fit in?

NW: There's a famous scholar called Peggy McIntosh, and she has this list called "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)." It's this idea that when you're white you have all these unearned privileges that your skin color gives you. I link that to the idea of vampire privilege and particularly to the Cullen vampires, who are incredibly white. Their whiteness is associated with their wealth, with their intellect, with their immortality, with sort of all the desirable things in the text. All the things in the text can be read as coded white privilege. They're far more privileged than the Quileute, which Stephenie Meyer depicts as russet colored. The vampires in the text that are negative tend to be—like there's the scene in South America where there's the woman, she's not actually a vampire—where Bella is interacting with her.

As I looked through the text, it's not overt and it's not a huge part of the saga, but there does tend to be a sort of...the olive-skinned vampires are described as more catlike and feral and sort of savage, the same with the Quileute people. I found people of color are not represented that positively, and then I read this in relation to the Mormon religion and the concept that once you are God's chosen people, which the Mormon religion would say are Mormons, you become a more white and delightful race. (Mormons) have a particular history with Native American people that to me is (in) the saga, probably not consciously on Stephenie Meyer's part, but I think because she's a Mormon and knows that history there is some sort of subconscious or some kind of subtext going on around race, white privilege, Mormon ideas about race.

S: Is the Special Topics course being used for an elective or for someone going towards an English degree?

NW: It counts towards the general electives towards the general education requirement that you need for the bachelor's. It's actually a women's studies course not a literature course so that's why there's so much emphasis on gender, race, class, representation of wealth and socioeconomic class in the saga, as well as the consumerism of the franchise. In a literature course, you might really look at the text and the characters and the writing, but since this is a women's studies class it's much more of a socio-political view of the saga.

S: When I talked to someone from the Special Topics department, she said there were 40 slots and 39 filled. Has the 40th slot been filled?

NW: No, it hasn't. There was 45 and there's always an add/drop period where students have the time to still add the class or still drop the class. There's always a little bit of movement. I had people dying to get into the class, but once the first two weeks is over people kind of give up. Unfortunately I got a spot three weeks in, and then nobody has realized that there's a spot. I had a waiting list, but nobody has come back.

S: You said that some people had only read one book or one movie. Would it be easier for someone who's read all five books, including "[Midnight Sun](#)"? Technically six books if we include the "The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner" book, too. Would it be easier if they've read all six books and seen the movies or would someone who was unfamiliar with "[Twilight](#)" be able to be as successful in the course?

NW: I think you're able to be as successful in the course if you've never had any experience. It's nice to get those different...I use the term Twi-Vi, which is short for Twi-Virgin, which basically means they're a virgin to the series. They've never seen any movies. They've never read any books. I think they're obviously going to have a different experience in the course, but they're not going to be at a disadvantage so I think anyone along the continuum can benefit. I'm having them read the first text, and we watched the first movie already. We'll watch another one of the movies that the students will vote on, and whichever gets the most votes we'll watch. The second book they can read of their choice so they can pick "[New Moon](#)," "[Eclipse](#)," "[Breaking](#)

Dawn." But the vast majority of them—I would say over half of them—have read all the books.

S: When people come away from this course, what do you want to be the biggest impact from the "*Twilight: The Text and the Fandom*"?

NW: If I have to pick a broad goal, I would say popular culture deserves to be taken seriously. Whenever there's these massive phenomenon, whether it's "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" or "*Gossip Girl*" or "*The Sopranos*," there's something that's speaking to the cultural moment that is worth investigating. A more specific goal would be for them to come away with a deeper appreciation for a text—whatever kind of text it is—and really investigating the meanings of it. With the "*Twilight*" fans, some of them love the series deeply but haven't ever really examined some of the messages about gender or religion or race or class so that it gives them a fresh take. Wherever they started, they see the saga in a new way by the time the class is over.

Check out more "Twilight" content here:

1. "[Alex Meraz, Paul from 'Twilight' series visits Chicago for The Official Twilight Convention](#)"
2. "[Applicious Shimmering Hand and Body Lotion from 'Twilight' hand model Kimbra](#)"
3. "[California State University Has 'Twilight' Course in Fall 2010 Class Lineup](#)"
4. "[I can't stand my brother's wife or girlfriend, relating to Rosalie from 'Twilight'](#)"
5. "[John Singleton's New Movie 'Abduction' Features 'Twilight' Star and Heartthrob Taylor Lautner](#)"
6. "[Movie Review of 'The Twilight Saga: Eclipse,' Are You Team Jacob or Team Edward?](#)"
7. "[Peter Facinelli, Carlisle from 'Twilight' series visits Chicago for The Official Twilight Convention](#)"
8. "[Photos: Official Twilight Convention in Chicago featuring Peter Facinelli and Alex Meraz](#)"
9. "[Scavenger hunt for Twilight perfume in Chicago supports copycat Nina perfumebottle controversy](#)"
10. "[Ten Reasons Why Jacob is Better Than Edward in 'Twilight' Series](#)"
11. "['The Twilight Saga: Eclipse' back in theaters, Twilight convention in Rosemont](#)"
12. "['The Twilight Saga: Eclipse' Re-releases on Sept. 10 in Honor of Bella's Birthday](#)"
13. "['Twilight' Movie Star Taylor Lautner Labeled 'diva' After \\$300,000 Trailer Confusion Leads to Suing McMahon's RV](#)"
14. "['Why 'Breaking Dawn' Would've Been Better Had it Been Written like 'Midnight Sun'](#)"

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- http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/5814546/california_state_university_has_twilight.html
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