



Spiritual themes ... Georgina Ledvinka is exploring how children's books encode theological and gender messages. Photo: Quentin Jones

Teeth sunk into subtle religious links

EDWARD CULLEN, the pallid vampire protagonist of the *Twilight* books who sets fans' hearts aflutter, is as much a Mormon as a teen icon, Georgina Ledvinka argues.

The doctoral candidate and associate lecturer in English literature at the University of Notre Dame is comparing the religious messages underpinning the work of three children's authors: C.S. Lewis, Philip Pullman and Stephenie Meyer.

"I chose these three because C.S. Lewis was very well known as a Christian, Pullman is regarded as an atheist and Meyer is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Ledvinka says. "I'm interested in how religion can appear in this kind of literature and how it encodes messages about the female gender."

Ledvinka's childhood reading

inspired her PhD topic. She was taken with the *Narnia* series as a young girl but only after reading a critique by Pullman did she come to think about the books' underlying Christian messages.

"It got me thinking in a whole new way," she says. "When the *Twilight* series came along and I found out Meyer is a practising Latter-day Saint, it seemed like a really good idea to have the three alongside each other."

Ledvinka argues that the *Twilight* series is, deliberately or otherwise, an allegory about faith that confronts the prejudicial depictions of Mormons in American society.

"I've argued that the Cullen [family of] vampires represents an idealised Latter-day Saints family and is presented as very likeable and monogamous," she says.

"They perform traditional gender

roles; the father goes to work, the mother stays at home and has a large number of children she looks after."

That message is not one that becomes immediately evident without a close reading of the book. "It's all wrapped up in a sexy romantic love story," Ledvinka says.

While volumes have been devoted to deconstructing literature for adults, children's literature is no more free of hidden meaning, she argues.

"Literature written for children and young adults has historically been on the instructional side and used to be written for the express purpose of teaching young people how to lead a moral life.

"It isn't strongly like that any more but you do see these tendencies coming through."

James Robertson