

A CONVERSATION WITH
STEPHENIE MEYER

What inspired you to write The Host?

The kernel of thought that became *The Host* was inspired by absolute boredom. I was driving from Phoenix to Salt Lake City, through some of the most dreary and repetitive desert in the world. It's a drive I've made many times, and one of the ways I keep from going insane is by telling myself stories.

I have no idea what sparked the strange foundation of a body-snatching alien in love with the host body's boyfriend over the host body's protest. I was halfway into the story before I realized it. Once I got started, though, the story immediately demanded my attention. I could tell there was something compelling in the idea of such a complicated triangle. I started writing the outline in a notebook and then fleshed it out as soon as I got to a computer. *The Host* was supposed to be no more than a side project — something to keep me busy between editing stints on *Eclipse* — but it turned into something I couldn't step away from until it was done.

Did you approach writing The Host, your first adult novel, differently from the way you approached your YA series?

Not at all. Like the Twilight Saga (this is probably the only way *The Host* is like the Twilight Saga!), *The Host* is just a story I had fun telling myself. My personal entertainment is always the key to why a story gets finished. I never think about another audience besides myself while I'm writing; that can wait for the editing stage.

*You have referred to *The Host* as a science fiction novel for people who don't like science fiction. Can you explain that?*

Reading *The Host* doesn't feel like reading science fiction; the world is familiar, the body you as the narrator are moving around inside is familiar, the emotions on the faces of the people around you are familiar. It's very much set in this world, with just a few key differences. If it weren't for the fact that alien stories are by definition science fiction, I wouldn't classify it in that genre.

There is a lot of internal dialogue between Wanderer, the narrator and invading "soul," and Melanie, the human whose body Wanderer is now living inside. Each character has her own distinct voice and internal struggle. Was it a challenge to have the two characters, who essentially take up one body, stand on their own?

Wanderer and Melanie were very distinct personalities to me from day one; keeping them separate was never an issue. Melanie is the victim — she's the one that we, as humans, should identify with; at the same time, she is not always the more admirable character. She can be angry and violent and ruthless. Wanderer is the attacker, the thief. She is not like us, not even a member of our species. However, she is someone that I, at least, wish I was more like. She's a better person than Melanie in a lot of ways, and yet a weaker person. The differences between the two main characters are the whole point of the story. If they weren't so distinct, there would have been no reason to write it.

Did any of the characters surprise you while you were writing?

I am constantly surprised by my characters when I write — it's really one of my favorite parts. When a character refuses to do what I had planned for him or her, that's when I know that character is really alive. There were several characters who caught me off guard with *The Host*. One in particular was slated for a bit part as the wingman to the villain. Somehow, he knew he was more than that, and I couldn't stop him from morphing into a main love interest.

Your Twilight series has had a lot of crossover appeal for adult readers. Do you think The Host will also appeal to your younger readers?

I've had a great deal of interest from my YA readers about *The Host*. I have no doubt that they will continue to make up a core part of my readership. I love blurring the lines between the different genres and categories — because, in my head, a good book won't fit inside the lines. I hope that *The Host* continues to do what the Twilight Saga is doing: showing that a good story doesn't belong to any one demographic.

How do you feel about the enormous success that you've had with the Twilight series? How has it changed your life?

I am continually shocked by the success of my books. I never take it for granted, and I do not count on it in my expectations of my future. It's a very enjoyable thing, and I'll have fun with it while it lasts. I've always considered myself first and foremost a mother, so being a writer hasn't changed my life too much — except I do travel a lot more and have less free time.

The movie rights to The Host have recently been sold. Can you tell us anything about bringing The Host to the big screen?

I'm so excited to be working with Nick Wechsler, and Steve and Paula Mae Schwartz, to bring *The Host* to a visual format. They've all been a dream to work with, so lovely and collaborative, and I feel like we're in a really good place to make a great movie together. And then to have Andrew Niccol writing and directing? Truly awesome. *Gattaca* is one of my favorite movies of all time. It's such a great example of character-driven science fiction, which is ideal for *The Host*. I'm having an absolute blast imagining dream casts and going on the different fansite forums to see if any of the fans' suggestions match mine.

QUESTIONS AND
TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the poem “Question” by May Swenson, which appears as the epigraph at the beginning of the novel, relate to some of the important themes in *The Host*?
2. The souls are described as bright silver ribbonlike creatures with hundreds of tiny tentacles. To some they seem beautiful, while others liken them to “worms” and “centipedes.” Do you think the souls’ physical form suits their nature? If you were to imagine a different form to give the souls, what would it be?
3. There is an ongoing debate in *The Host* about the true nature of humans. Wanderer reflects, “The humans *were* brutish and ungovernable. They had killed one another so frequently that murder had been an accepted part of life” (page 47). Do you think this brutality is innate to mankind? If so, does this make the peaceable souls’ decision to take over the earth more ethical?
4. While most of *The Host* is narrated by Wanderer, Melanie occasionally takes over the narration to relate important memories. Why might Stephenie Meyer have chosen to tell the story in this way? Did you connect more with one voice than the other?
5. The souls believe they are transforming the vicious human world into a utopia. Is the society the souls construct better than the natural society of humans? Melanie tells Wanderer that humans realized the souls were taking over bodies “when the evening

news was nothing but inspiring human-interest stories . . . when everything morphed into Mayberry” (page 108). How does the society of the souls on earth compare to your image of “a perfect world”?

6. The souls are morally complicated creatures. On one hand, they are “all things good: compassionate, patient, honest, virtuous, and full of love” (page 3). On the other, they survive by taking over the bodies and minds of unsuspecting hosts. Does the parasitic nature of the souls overshadow their virtuous qualities? Did you sympathize with the souls, or did you view them as the clear enemies of humans?
7. When Wanderer is lost in the desert searching for Jared and Jamie, Melanie tells her, “You’ve finally found the place and the body you’d die for. I think you’ve found your home, Wanderer” (page 113). What is the significance of “home” in *The Host*? Why has Wanderer chosen to move from world to world for so many millennia? Can earth ever really be home for a soul?
8. When Wanderer first arrives in the caves, she reflects, “This place was truly the highest and the lowest of all worlds — the most beautiful senses, the most exquisite emotions . . . the most malevolent desires, the darkest deeds” (page 141). Are these extremes inevitable? Are our darker inclinations essential to the richness of human experience? Do you agree with the premise that more purely “good” beings like the souls can’t experience life as fully as humans can?
9. The humans in the caves are divided about how to view and treat Wanderer. Do you think it is more reasonable to extend kindness to Wanderer or to ostracize her as a potential threat to the group? If you lived in the caves, how would you greet her arrival?
10. Of everybody in the caves, Jared reacts to Wanderer in a manner that is perhaps the most complex. Does the way he treats her surprise you? What do you imagine is going through his head in the

first days after Wanderer's arrival? What instigates the change in his attitude toward her?

11. When Wanderer/Melanie first arrive at the caves, Melanie is eager for them to explain their situation, but Wanderer insists on staying mute, even if it means being subject to imprisonment and abuse. Why does Wanderer make this choice? Do you think it is a wise one? How might things have played out differently if they had done it Melanie's way?
12. While Wanderer describes many of the worlds where she has lived in great detail, we learn very little about her birth world, The Origin. How do you imagine The Origin? What would a world populated only by souls be like?
13. Near the novel's end, Wanda makes a deal with Doc. Do you think she makes the right decision about Melanie's fate and her own? Were you satisfied with the humans' response to her decision?
14. Jamie tells Wanderer he chose Pet because "I was looking for someone who looked like *you*. And I thought this looked like you" (page 605). Do you agree with Jamie? Do you think Pet's body matches Wanderer's nature?
15. Imagine a prequel to *The Host*. Of the different worlds Wanderer lived on before arriving on Earth, which would you be most interested in imagining more fully? Similarly, each of the humans living in the caves during *The Host* has a back story. Which of these would you be most interested in learning more about?

STEPHENIE MEYER'S ANNOTATED
PLAYLIST FOR THE HOST

As much as I love music, as big a part as music plays in my writing process, I always have a hard time *explaining* my music — at least as it relates to the story. I end up using the phrase “*this song fits into the moment when . . .*” over and over again. It’s dead boring. So instead of explaining each song’s place, I’ve listed the character from whose perspective I hear the lyrics (most of them are Wanderer, naturally) and added a quote that gives an example of a moment when that song fits the action/emotion in my head.

Some of the songs are very specific to the scene — like #15, “Don’t Stay” by Linkin Park. Others are more widely applicable, corresponding to big themes throughout the story — like #3, “Futurism” by Muse, and #22, “Original of the Species” by U2. In those cases, I still pulled just one quote, but one that I think hints at the whole theme. Also, a few of the songs are out of order on my website. I left them numbered the same, but from the pages and chapters listed you’ll see what order they really belong in.

1. “Soul Meets Body,” Death Cab for Cutie
Wanderer, Chapter 1: “Remembered,” page 9

With the truest instinct of my kind, I’d bound myself securely into the body’s center of thought, twined myself inescapably into its every breath and reflex until it was no longer a separate entity. It was me.

Not *the* body, *my* body.

2. “Papercut,” Linkin Park

Wanderer, Chapter 4: “Dreamed,” page 39

Her voice in my head was as clear as my own spoken aloud. I shuddered in horror.

3. “Futurism,” Muse

Melanie, Chapter 5: “Uncomforted,” page 47

No one could compare what had been and what was now and not admit that Earth was a better place thanks to us.

You murder an entire species and then pat yourselves on the back.

4. “I Wasn’t Prepared,” Easley

Wanderer, Chapter 9: “Discovered,” page 86

“Enough,” I said out loud, cringing away from the whiplash of pain. “Enough! You’ve made your point! I can’t live without them either now. Does that make you happy? Because it doesn’t leave me many choices, does it? Just one — to get rid of you.”

5. “Walking After You,” Foo Fighters

Wanderer/Melanie, Chapter 11: “Dehydrated,” page 101

The yearning belonged to us both; the image of their faces, one man, one child, came from both memories. When I walked faster, I wasn’t sure that I was completely in command of the motion.

6. “Down in It,” Nine Inch Nails

Wanderer, Chapter 13: “Sentenced,” page 120

I forced her to see it from my perspective: to see the threatening shapes inside the dirty jeans and light cotton shirts, brown with dust. They might have been human — as she thought of the word — once, but at this moment they were something else. They were barbarians, monsters. They hung over us, slaving for blood.

There was a death sentence in every pair of eyes.

7. “Blood,” Editors

Wanderer, Chapter 13: “Sentenced,” page 123

The much-aged woman named Maggie lunged forward with a speed that belied her brittle exterior. She didn’t raise the hand that held the black crowbar. That was the hand I was watching, so I didn’t see her free hand swing out to slap me hard across the face.

My head snapped back and then forward. She slapped me again.

“You won’t *fool* us, you parasite. We know how you work. We know how well you can mimic us.”

I tasted blood inside my cheek.

8. “Pts.OF.Athrty,” Linkin Park

Wanderer, Chapter 15: “Guarded,” page 144

My heart started thumping faster than before, jerking against my ribs so hard that the hammering disrupted the rhythm of my lungs, made it difficult to breathe. Melanie was incapacitated with fear, unable to think in coherent words.

They were going to hurt him. Those lunatic humans were going to attack one of their own.

9. “Fortress Around Your Heart,” Sting

Wanderer, Chapter 17: “Visited,” page 166

Jamie watched me with cautious eyes and then took four slow steps forward until he stood over me. His glance flitted to Jeb, who hadn’t moved or opened his eyes, and then Jamie knelt down at my side. His face was suddenly intense, and it made him look more adult than any expression yet. My heart throbbed for the sad man in the little boy’s face.

10. “The Ghost of You,” My Chemical Romance

Jared, Chapter 17: “Visited,” page 169

Jared spit on the floor. “That’s not Melanie. She’s never coming back, Jamie.”

11. “Because I Want You,” Placebo
Wanderer, Chapter 19: “Abandoned,” page 184

Jared’s voice changed, became low, almost tender. So much more dangerous than the shouting. “Why didn’t you want to tell her?”

My jaw locked hard. It was not *the* secret, but still, it was a secret he would have to beat out of me. In this moment, my determination to hold my tongue had less to do with self-preservation than it did with a stupid, grudging kind of pride. I would *not* tell this man who despised me that I loved him.

12. “Stockholm Syndrome,” Muse
Wanderer, Chapter 26: “Returned,” page 261

Jeb had wasted his efforts on the wrong people. It didn’t matter that Trudy or Lily was speaking to me, that Ian would put himself between his brother and me, that Sharon and Maggie made no hostile move toward me. The only one who had to be convinced had now, finally, decided.

“I don’t think anyone needs to calm down,” Jared said through his teeth. “Jeb,” he continued, not looking to see if the old man had followed him forward, “give me the gun.”

The silence that followed his words was so tense I could feel the pressure inside my ears.

From the instant I could clearly see his face, I’d known it was over. I knew what I had to do now; Melanie was in agreement. As quietly as I could, I took a step to the side and slightly back, so that I would be clear of Ian. Then I closed my eyes.

13. “As You Are,” Travis
Wanderer, Chapter 31: “Needed,” pages 326–327

Because I was in love with him, no matter that it was unwilling, I had to look at Jared before I left. Mel wanted this, too, but wished that she could somehow exclude me from the process.

He was staring at me. I had a feeling his eyes had been on me for a long time. His face was carefully composed, but there was surprise

and suspicion in there again. It made me tired. What would be the point of acting out a charade now, even if I were that talented a liar? Walter would never stand up for me again. I couldn't *sucker* him anymore.

I met Jared's gaze for one long second, then turned to hurry down the pitch-black corridor that was brighter than his expression.

14. "Smile Like You Mean It," The Killers

Wanderer, Chapter 38: "Touched," page 394

"So that's good, isn't it, Wanda? It will be just like before we came here!"

It felt sort of like a razor sliding between my ribs when he said that — too clean and precise a pain to be compared to a blow or a break.

Jamie analyzed my tortured expression with alarm. "Oh. No, I mean but with you, too. It will be nice. The four of us, right?"

I tried to laugh through the pain; it didn't hurt any worse than not laughing.

15. "Don't Stay," Linkin Park

Wanderer, Chapter 40: "Horrorified," pages 413–414

GET OUT OF MY HEAD! I shrieked.

As I thrust her away from me — gagged her so that I wouldn't have to bear her justifications — I realized how weak she'd grown in all these months of friendliness. How much I'd been allowing. Encouraging.

It was almost too easy to silence her. As easy as it should have been from the beginning.

16. "Just Like You," Three Days Grace

Wanderer, Chapter 40: "Horrorified," page 415

"Look, I guess that must have been pretty . . . bad. We never wanted you to see that. I'm sorry."

Sorry? Geoffrey'd said it was Jared's idea. He wanted to cut me

out, slice me into little pieces, fling my blood on the wall. He'd slowly mangle a million of me if he could find a way to keep his favorite monster alive with him. Slash us all to slivers.

17. "Consolation Prizes," Phoenix
Ian, Chapter 42: "Forced," page 431

"Just think of it as . . . an experiment," Ian was saying.

"Are you crazy?" Jared answered. "Is this some sick joke?"

My stomach dropped through the floor.

Overwhelmed. *That's* what he'd meant.

Blood burned in my face, hot as Jamie's fever. What was Ian doing to me? I wanted to run, to hide somewhere better than my last hiding place, somewhere I could never, ever be found, no matter how many flashlights they used. But my legs were shaking, and I couldn't move.

Ian and Jared came into view in the room where the tunnels met. Ian's face was expressionless; he had one hand on Jared's shoulder and was guiding him, almost pushing him forward.

18. "My Name Is Love," Rob Dickinson
Wanderer/Ian, Chapter 56: "Welded," page 575

With Ian it was different, so very different, because Melanie didn't love him the way I did. So when he touched me, it was deeper and slower than the wildfire, like the flow of molten rock far beneath the surface of the earth. Too deep to feel the heat of it, but it moved inexorably, changing the very foundations of the world with its advance.

My unwilling body was a fog between us — a thick curtain, but gauzy enough that I could see through it, could see what was happening.

It changed *me*, not her. It was almost a metallurgical process deep inside the core of who I was, something that had already begun, was already nearly forged. But this long, unbroken kiss finished it, searing and sharp edged — it shoved this new creation, all hissing, into the cold water that made it hard and final. Unbreakable.

And I started to cry again, realizing that it must be changing him,

too, this man who was kind enough to be a soul but strong as only a human could be.

He moved his lips to my eyes, but it was too late. It was done. “Don’t cry, Wanda. Don’t cry. You’re staying with me.”

19. “The Hand That Feeds,” Nine Inch Nails

Wanderer, Chapter 51: “Prepared,” page 518

My eyes were locked on my feet as I climbed down. It was necessary; there was no path, and the loose rocks made for treacherous footing. But even if the way had been paved and smooth, I doubted I would have been able to lift my eyes. My shoulders, too, seemed trapped in a slump.

Traitor. Not a misfit, not a wanderer. Just a traitor. I was putting my gentle brothers’ and sisters’ lives into the angry and motivated hands of my adopted human family.

My humans had every right to hate the souls. This was a war, and I was giving them a weapon. A way to kill with impunity.

20. “My Body Is a Cage,” Arcade Fire

Wanderer, Chapter 57: “Completed,” page 579

I stared into Jared’s eyes, and the strangest thing happened. All the melting and melding I had just been through was shoved aside, into the smallest part of my body, the little corner that I took up physically. The rest of me yearned toward Jared with the same desperate, half-crazed hunger I’d felt since the first time I’d seen him here. This body barely belonged to me or to Melanie — it belonged to him.

There really wasn’t room enough for the two of us in here.

21. “Rescued,” Jack’s Mannequin

Wanderer/Jared, Chapter 58: “Finished,” page 591

“Stay here, Wanda. With us. With *me*. I don’t want you to go. Please. I can’t imagine having you gone. I can’t *see* that. I don’t know how to . . . how to . . .” His voice broke.

He was a very good liar. And he must have been very, very sure of me to say those things.

I rested against him for a moment, but I could feel the time pulling me away. Time was up. Time was up.

22. “Original of the Species,” U2
Ian, Chapter 57: “Completed,” page 587

“I truly love you, Ian.” It was the only way I could tell him good-bye. The only way he would accept. I knew he would remember later and understand. “With my whole soul, I love you.”

“I truly love you, too, my Wanderer.”

He nuzzled his face against mine until he found my lips, then he kissed me, slow and gentle, the flow of molten rock swelling languidly in the dark at the center of the earth, until my shaking slowed.

23. “The Last Song,” The All-American Rejects
Wanderer, Chapter 58: “Finished,” page 591

No one had ever lied better than Jared lied with his body in my last minutes, and for that I was grateful. I couldn’t take it with me, because I wasn’t going anywhere, but it eased some of the pain of leaving. I could believe the lie. I could believe that he would miss me so much that it might even mar some of his joy. I shouldn’t want that, but it felt good to believe it anyway.

24. “Beautiful Day,” U2
Wanderer, Chapter 59: “Remembered,” page 608

Happy and sad, elated and miserable, secure and afraid, loved and denied, patient and angry, peaceful and wild, complete and empty . . . all of it. I would feel everything. It would all be mine.