

True Blood: “Popcorn TV” for a generation that needs so much more

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HBO’s *True Blood*, based on the Sookie Stackhouse novels by Charlaine Harris and well into its third of four planned seasons, is the latest entry in the ongoing vampire revival directed toward teens and twenty-somethings (though the language, nudity and sex probably limit the number of high-school-age teens and attract more of the 30-plus audience).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) deserves credit for focusing on problems faced by its young audience and offering a cast of high school students who acted and spoke with some intelligence and wit—a rarity for any television series, let alone one aimed toward teenagers.

The more recent *Twilight* series of movies represents a decided lowering of artistic standards. Its “wit,” if one can call it that, is not nearly as sharp as *Buffy*’s, and its portrayal of current teenagers’ problems within the context of the vampire genre does little more than validate self-pity and cynicism.

True Blood is guilty of the cynicism, and more. Several actors deserve notice for their performances, and there is the occasional instance of honest, location-driven humor; but after watching three-plus seasons, one feels as if Quentin Tarantino had been given carte blanche to produce a series for HBO. As the series drags on, sex and violence increasingly become the *raison d’être* for the characters and the story, and there is a decided sense that screenwriter Alan Ball (*American Beauty*) has no interest in looking at human relations honestly and in fact holds a condescending attitude toward his project and viewers.

The story is the traditional one found in teenage movies since at least the early 1950s: young people facing temptations and obstacles on their way to self-

discovery and adulthood. The central human characters, Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin), her brother, Jason (Ryan Kwanten), best friend, Tara Thornton (Rutina Wesley), boss and friend Sam Merlotte (Sam Trammell) are good, decent people whose lack of self-worth and overall insecurity are born of a community (mythical Bon Temps, Louisiana) rife with dysfunctional or non-existent families, alcoholism and other forms of drug addiction, prejudice, and a general intolerance of others.

Vampires and other supernaturals—most notably Sookie’s love interest, Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer), Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård), Jessica Hamby (Deborah Ann Woll), and maenad MaryAnn Forrester (Michelle Forbes)—fill the “rebel” role found in earlier teen movies, i.e., the character or characters who provide both the temptations and courage to question existing rules. Once *True Blood*’s human characters enjoy sexual relations and experience love with the vampires, they look for answers (unsuccessfully) in an evangelical church and the “anything goes” lifestyle of a bacchanalian group while exploring their own repressed past.

The vampires themselves struggle with right-wing, “anti-vampire” forces and their own internal problems, and by the middle of the third season, they and the humans are left to struggle with the consequences of changing allegiances.

All good humor is drawn from the way people go about living their lives, and this is true in the case of the earlier episodes of *True Blood*, which often feature the metaphorical, deadpan-delivery humor of its southern Louisiana location. At one point, Sookie admits that she “couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it”; and Sam Merlotte’s biological mother uses a colorful metaphor to explain Sam’s half-brother’s penchant for

doing the wrong thing at the wrong time: “Sometimes the cheese falls off that boy’s cracker.”

The performances by Anna Paquin, Stephen Moyer, Ryan Kwanten, and Nelsan Ellis as Sookie’s best friend Lafayette Reynolds deserve to be praised for avoiding one-dimensionality and straining after effect.

But as the series drags on, violence of an entirely needless nature supersedes character and story development. This is not the victim-ravishing violence of the typical vampire movie; in fact, vampire bites are almost a relief from the postmodernist variety of violence found in much of *True Blood*. That is to say, dismemberments and similar atrocities are repeated ad nauseam until the acts are emptied of human motivation and consequences. Are we expected to find these acts humorous, a la Tarantino’s movies?

Repulsion is more often the result. In the “postmortem”—an epilogue that follows each episode—to episode 3 of season 3, Adolf Hitler is shown planning to use werewolves as a last line of defense for his crumbling regime. Another postmortem consists entirely of bloody body parts flying through the air with up-tempo music playing in the background. Such “humor” was not at all funny in *Inglorious Bastards*; here, one simply wants to turn off the television and walk away.

The same problem holds true in regard to the series’ depiction of sexual acts. Sexuality is indeed central to the vampire legend, and Bill Compton’s sexual encounters with Sookie (especially toward the beginning of the series) are artfully presented. But the sexual encounters become numbing with too much frequency; one often feels *True Blood* falls into the stale pattern of story being used to set up sex and violence.

More damaging is the sense that screenwriter/director Alan Ball’s attempt to add substance to the series tends toward the banal and sensationalist.

The scenes devoted to the rigid, right-wing Fellowship of the Sun Church are in some ways entertaining, but they are also simplistic; the vampires are obviously meant to represent contemporary Muslims or any other maligned group, and we don’t learn anything about evangelical hypocrisy and intolerance of differences that we haven’t already learned from the evening news or tabloids.

The scenes depicting the citizens of Bon Temps

engaging in bacchanalia are nothing more than the gratuitous sensationalism one would expect from tabloids or Internet pornography.

Does the fact that *True Blood* is a vampire movie aimed toward teenagers and twenty-something’s give license to the script’s superficiality? Mr. Ball seems to think so. In an interview conducted after finishing *Six Feet Under* and around the time of *True Blood*’s premiere, he spoke of taking on the project because he wanted to do something more “escapist” this time. When asked about the sex and violence in *True Blood*, Mr. Ball stated that “it’s like popcorn TV, it’s like an amusement park ride for me.”

True Blood’s audience already has a great many unmet emotional and intellectual needs. Job and health care losses, and wages at poverty or near-poverty level for the majority of Americans, combined with the ongoing destruction of the social network, leave this generation with little to celebrate, and less to nourish its curiosity. This is why even such banalities as *Twilight* and *True Blood*, complete with websites, interactive Facebooks and apparel, can find popularity. But “popcorn TV” offers them only malnourishment.



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