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INTRODUCTION

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BEFORE THE NIGHT IS THROUGH: *TRUE BLOOD* AS CULT TV

Brigid Cherry

As the lyrics of its theme song suggest, *True Blood* wants to do bad things with you. Free from the constraints normally imposed on mainstream television, the HBO subscription-only cable channel has a reputation for cutting-edge, in-your-face television that employs liberal amounts of sex, violence and swearing as well as serious or adult themes in an artful and stylistic package. For example, when Alan Ball screened his pilot for *Six Feet Under* (2001–5, HBO, USA), he says that ‘HBO sent me a note saying “Can you make this more f***ed-up?”’ (quoted in Ayres 2009). Similarly, *Deadwood* (2004–6, HBO, USA) is infamous for its liberal use of the words fuck and cocksucker and *The Sopranos* (1999–2007, HBO, USA) is known for excessive violence with its frequent bloody and explicit murder scenes. This set of ‘bad things’ is a guarantee of the HBO brand and an extremely successful formula. The cable channel therefore seems the natural home for *True Blood* with its Gothic horror themes, its explicit nudity and depictions of sex, its sensationalist images of blood and gore and its quirky, ironic and profane dialogue. Writing for io9, Meredith Woerner – in a veiled comparison to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003, WB, USA) – describes the characters as ‘hornier than the entire cast of every WB show ever’ (2008), while *Rolling Stone* put a now infamous photograph of blood-spattered and naked stars Alexander Skarsgård, Anna Paquin and Stephen Moyer on the cover of

the 17 August 2010 edition under the tagline 'They're hot, they're sexy, they're undead'.¹

True Blood launched in 2008 with an elaborate marketing campaign that was less advertising for the programme itself than it was a form of transmedia storytelling. The 'Great Revelation' that vampires were 'real' established the narrative drive of the series, namely that the invention of a Japanese synthetic blood product could sustain vampires and allow them to co-exist freely with humans. This set the scene for a fictional world in which humans are attracted to or repulsed by the vampires now living among and alongside them. The series, based on *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* by Charlaine Harris, began production in October 2005 (Time Warner, 2005). Ball had casually come across the first novel *Dead Until Dark* (Harris 2001) and immediately read through the rest of the novels published up to that point in time. *True Blood* takes its basic premise from the novels and tells the romantic adventures of a telepathic waitress and her encounters with vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters, fairies and witches. HBO picked the series up for a full season after a pilot was produced over the summer of 2007. As showrunner, Ball has written at least one episode per season, while other contributors include recognized film, television and music video directors such as John Dahl, Michael Lehmann, Lesli Linka Glatter and Marcos Siega and production personnel Ball worked with on *Six Feet Under*, including Daniel Minahan and Michael Cuesta.

The first episode of *True Blood* aired in the USA on 7 September 2008 and set the scene for the narrative with the vampire Bill Compton walking into the local bar Merlotte's in the small Louisiana town of Bon Temps. Waitress Sookie Stackhouse is intrigued since all her life she has been plagued by her extra-normal telepathy, but Bill is different, she cannot pick up his thoughts and this is blessed silence for her. She has been unable to develop a close relationship with a man before and so Bill, despite being a vampire, is the ideal

romantic and sexual partner. She is warned against such a relationship by her brother Jason, her boss Sam Merlotte and her best friend Tara Thornton, but supported by her loving grandmother Adele. It is not vampires that are the problem, however, and the villain of this first season turns out to be a human serial killer. In keeping with the theme of the romantic and sympathetic vampire, later seasons used religious fundamentalists, Greek nymphs, dissident vampire royalty and possessed witches as the main antagonists, encounters with whom often provide the cliff-hanger ending to each episode (the other form of cliff-hanger frequently employed is the start of an explicit sex scene which culminates at the beginning of the next episode). In this way, each season has a dramatic spine on which the romantic attachments and domestic storylines are anchored. Further narrative contexts are provided by the music, each episode title being taken from a track that is featured in the episode. Examples include Bing Crosby's 'Mine', Johnny Cash's 'The Fourth Man in the Fire', Siouxsie and the Banshees' 'Spellbound' and Billie Holiday's 'I Got a Right to Sing the Blues'.²

Moyer and Paquin were also interesting casting choices in the context of the supernatural narrative. Paquin is well known for her role in *The Piano* (1993, Jane Campion, Australia/New Zealand/France), but also appeared as Rogue in *X-Men* (2000, Bryan Singer, USA) and its sequel. Comic-book fans would no doubt be aware that the character considers her mutant powers a curse. In a mirroring of Sookie's telepathy and regional identity, Rogue is a 'Southern belle' from Mississippi who can absorb the memories of others along with their strength and abilities and consequently feels unable to be intimate with anyone. Moreover, Moyer played a vampire before – in the cult British series *Ultraviolet* (1998, Channel 4, UK). Although it ran for only six episodes, and Moyer appeared only in the first and last, there are a number of intriguing connections that might be made by vampire and horror fans. The vampires in *Ultraviolet* (although they are not referred to as such, being called leeches in reference to their bloodsucking or referred to

as Code Five, the Roman numeral V also standing for vampire) are transported in sleek, hi-tech coffins, have a highly organized hierarchy, are cultured and intelligent and are not repulsed by religious symbols such as the cross. Although these cult connections are not overtly referenced within the *True Blood* text, they can – for fan audiences at least – add to the cult cachet of the series. Vampire, horror and cult TV fans might also pick up on similarities to the Gothic soap *Dark Shadows* (1966–71, ABC, USA). As Frank DiMartini (2010) writes: ‘The memories of those times are now being relived by ... *True Blood*. [It] is an updated version of *Dark Shadows* and appears to be getting more and more supernatural with each passing week, which is exactly what happened with *Dark Shadows*.’ Barnabas Collins was an early example of the sympathetic vampire and there is a similar mix of werewolves, ghosts, warlocks and witches. *Dark Shadows* can certainly be seen as a generic precursor to *True Blood* and other supernatural series such as *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–ongoing, The CW, USA).

Even without these extra-textual elements, *True Blood* is clearly that unpredictable thing, an assured cult hit. It is no easy task to set out what makes a cult text; there is no clear-cut set of traits to measure a series against and there are no clearly defined parameters of a single category that can be labelled cult TV. In fact it may well be that any definition has to include several complementary and contradictory traits (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson 2004, x). Debates about which texts might be classed as cults and why, therefore have to be considered in each and every case and there may not even be agreement. In any case, the term ‘cult TV’ does not signify a genre as such. Even taking the most straightforward approach – namely that a film or programme is a cult because it has a cult audience – is rarely straightforward. Some cults are also extremely popular blockbusters with large audiences. There are a number of factors in the production of the series that can therefore be considered as contributing to *True Blood*’s status as cult TV.

HBO

In recent years, HBO has produced critically acclaimed and popular series such as *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire* (2002–8, HBO, USA), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–ongoing, HBO, USA) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–ongoing, HBO, USA). The production teams of all these series are unafraid to be confrontational in their writing or in their explicit visuals. As Christopher Anderson points out, HBO has successfully established a ‘unique cultural value among television networks’ and produced ‘original series that had the potential to engender loyalty among viewers’ (2008, 30). Moreover, the channel ‘is positioned to pursue innovations in a way that the broadcast networks are not’ (Anderson 2008, 31). Being a commercial free network, HBO is also free from the pressure that having to sell advertising places on programme producers to be inoffensive and deliver a broad demographic in its audiences. HBO also invests heavily in its series and according to Anderson they ‘lavish more money on the production of their drama series than any of the broadcast networks can possibly afford’ (2008, 35). Many of HBO’s series have subsequently received acclaim from critics and been acknowledged in television awards; *True Blood* has received many nominations in the Emmys, Golden Globes and other technical awards, but perhaps notably with respect to gaining cult status it won the People’s Choice Award for ‘Favorite TV Obsession’ in 2010³ and in terms of critical reception it won ‘Outstanding New Program of the Year’ at the Television Critics Association Awards in 2009.⁴

However, HBO reaches only a quarter of American households with television sets and its subscribers are largely in the upper-middle-class demographic (Anderson 2008, 34–5). This means that it does not have a large audience in comparison with other channels. Nevertheless, its series are widely recognized and viewed by new audiences in syndication, on DVD and in international markets. On HBO, the first episode of *True Blood* had an audience of 1.44 million, low compared with other HBO series (Martin 2008) but this grew to 2.1 million with the

10:30 pm repeat and to an estimated 4 million including time shifting (Frankel 2008). Further, audiences grew episode-on-episode and season-to-season (most likely due to a combination of media coverage and word-of-mouth). The audience for the opening episode of season two was 3.7 million, HBO's largest audience since *The Sopranos* finale (Weprin 2009). From the middle of the second season onwards, the series has attracted audiences of over 5 million viewers, becoming the top-rated cable series among 18–49-year-olds in season three (Seidman 2010). In comparison, the first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reached an audience of 3.33 million and achieved a peak of 4.67 million viewers during its third season. A mainstream series such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–ongoing, CBS, USA) has audiences of between 13 and 25 million viewers per episode. Whilst small audiences do not guarantee cult status, the niche appeal of *True Blood* is clear.

Alan Ball

Alan Ball, the writer of *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999, USA), first came together with HBO as creator and executive producer of *Six Feet Under*. Ball was well known before his work for HBO, having won the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards and the Best Screenplay award at the Golden Globes in 2000 for *American Beauty*. Like *American Beauty*, *Six Feet Under* was a multi-layered, polysemic narrative about the minutiae and stresses of everyday life, including many overt references to issues surrounding sexuality, grief, depression, madness and death. When contracted by HBO to develop other series, he was well positioned to explore further edgy material. *True Blood* certainly seemed to take Ball in a different direction. On the surface at least it was about anything but the ordinary and the everyday, being a fantasy-horror about vampires and other supernatural creatures. However, Ball has stated that these creatures do indeed have everyday lives and the series shows them 'living their lives and trying

to find a place for themselves in the world, with lots of sex and violence' (quoted in Woerner 2008). He wanted it to be 'as rooted in reality as a show about vampires could be' by setting out to 'root what we consider supernatural in nature' (Sky TV, 2009). And death of course is as much an explicit shadow in *True Blood* as it was in *Six Feet Under*, a series about a family of funeral directors. Ball has stated in interviews, however, that *True Blood* is his antidote to the seriousness of *Six Feet Under*: '[It] was about life in the presence of death. But after that show ended I thought to myself: "OK, I'm done looking into the abyss now. I'm ready for a theme park ride"' (quoted in Ayres 2009). Thus, *True Blood* is 'fun. It's like popcorn TV. *Six Feet Under* was all about repression, and this [series] seemed to me to be about abandon. I find the show really entertaining to produce and to be a part of making. It's escapist – it's totally escapist' (in Woerner 2008).

As a gay Southerner, Ball also brings an identity to the series that is reflected in the fictional world of *True Blood*. According to Chris Ayres: 'Ball clearly has a nostalgia for what he calls the "gothic sensibility of the South", and it seeps through every beautifully shot HD frame of *True Blood*' (2009). The series is also about various groups of outsiders and individuals who feel different or at odds with the world. Nevertheless, it clearly celebrates difference, particularly through its representations of sexuality. In fact, *True Blood* has a reputation for its levels of explicit sex and nudity. Being produced for HBO and as Ball says, having 'a cast that doesn't get uptight about it' means that the sex scenes can be presented in a direct and unambiguous way, as well as being integral to the narrative (that is, non-gratuitous). For Ball, the sex in *True Blood* is 'primal' and he has stated that the sex scenes are 'just a way of telling the story [of] people's yearnings and people's desire to connect' (quoted in Itzkoff 2011). Furthermore, *True Blood's* Southern setting is paramount in Ball's production choices: 'Vampires are total sexual metaphors, there's just no way around that. And the fact that it all takes place in this wet, humid, swampy, primeval madness, of course you're going to

go there' (in Itzkoff 2011). Ball has also said that he thinks 'sexuality is a window into someone's soul' (quoted in Woener 2008) and certainly this facilitates the viewing pleasures for fans of the vampire genre.

Charlaine Harris

True Blood was also assured success by dint of being pre-sold on the back of Charlaine Harris's popular *Southern Vampire Mysteries* and the resurgence of the vampire and paranormal romance genres in general. The first book in the series *Dead Until Dark* had been published in 2000 and three other volumes were in print in 2005 when Ball decided it would be his follow-up to *Six Feet Under* for HBO.⁵ It was ideal material, as Ball discusses when he talks about its appeal: 'Charlaine Harris has created a rich world filled with unique characters, a world that's as terrifying as it is hilarious, as well as sexy, generous and profound' (quoted in TimeWarner 2005). One notable point is that the novels are narrated from Sookie's perspective, lending them a clear focus for readers, allowing them to engage with a particular, individualistic worldview and identify strongly with the heroine. The paranormal romance genre has a predominantly female readership and is largely written by female authors, as is the romance genre from which it stems (Bond 2009). As Kenneth Partridge points out, sales of books in the female-oriented paranormal romance and urban fantasy genres are flourishing while publishing generally is declining (2009, 163). Sookie is the kind of character that appeals to female readers. Lillian Craton and Kathryn Jonell make the point that 'Sookie's story is worth hearing not just because of its exciting supernatural adventures but because she's truly a woman of her times, living out all of the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary feminism while maintaining a tough, spunky "girl power" appeal' (2010, 110). It is to be expected that *True Blood*, based on Sookie's world and worldview, appeals to a female audience as well.

Furthermore, in his adaptation, Ball has transformed the text by widening it out to encompass the multiple points of view of a range of characters:

The good thing about Charlaine's books is that the stories work – however the book really centers on [main character] Sookie's story. So unless the other characters are in the same scene as her they don't appear in the book that much. So I feel that we have the best of both worlds. We have an elaborate story that works, and we have a lot of other characters and we can devise stories for them that remain true to Charlaine's world. So there will be something in there for the people who were fans of the books and there will be surprise scenes as well. (Quoted in Woerner 2008)

This has also widened out the potential audience demographic, though *True Blood* maintains a large female fan following and characters such as Bill, Alcide and (especially) Eric are subject to 'Team ...' affiliations (in the same way that Team Edward and Team Jacob dominate *Twilight* fandom).

Digital Kitchen

In attracting its audience, the series itself has many hooks, but one of the most notable and striking is the opening title sequence, created by the design firm Digital Kitchen. The agency has worked on many television advertisements (for Nike, Audi and Budweiser, for example) and has also produced title sequences for *House* (2004–ongoing, Fox, USA), *Six Feet Under* and *Dexter* (2006–ongoing, Showtime, USA). As the company state on their website, they regard a title sequence as 'tell[ing] a separate, parallel story. These are little art films really, that find their own voice, all while arming audiences with each show's unique psychology and worldview'.⁶ The story that the *True Blood* title sequence

tells is one of heat, passion, death and the South. It consists of over 65 shots rhythmically edited to the title track 'Bad Things' by Jace Everett. The shots fall into the categories of landscape, wildlife, historical, people, religion and sex. The footage is comprised of original documentary, studio, tabletop photography and found footage and is shot using seven different still, film and video cameras including super 8, home video and 16mm as well as HD. On the 'Making Of' video,⁷ the production team talk about watching the pilot and being 'simultaneously horrified and captivated'. They wanted to capture a vibe that suggested the 'point of view of supernatural predatorial creatures watching human beings from the outskirts' and how they 'would see human beings in a blood-thirsty way'. The titles thus show 'seething sexuality and contorted bodies and ideas of violence, seeing it as sex or violence' and how this would have a cumulative effect in influencing human behaviour.

The sequence is designed to build to a crescendo until the viewer feels they 'couldn't possibly take anymore' with the night baptism at the end as a 'cathartic relief' and 'the redemption of all the previous evils that you've seen leading up to this in the sequence'. Accordingly, many of the images depict or suggest ecstasy or death: the time-lapse decay of a fox, the evangelical church-goers taken up in the spirit, the Ku Klux Klan and the burning cross, the boys greedily and messily eating berries, the alligator skull, the women writhing on the floor in the bar and in the water at the baptism, the frog snared by a venus flytrap. The titles are designed to be 'a patchwork quilt of images stitched together by the fervor of religious fanaticism and repressed sexual energy', yet they also create a narrative flow from the swamps and bayous of the landscape into the hearts and minds of the inhabitants. The sequence also has temporal flow moving from dawn through day to night, while the images become increasingly sexual and violent. It is thus a psychological landscape that evokes the emotions of vampires and humans, underlined by the drops of blood that splatter the frames. Accordingly, the blood and membrane

sequences for the main title card were practical effects shot using a rostrum camera (as opposed to computer-generated or digital effects) in order to 'feel biological'. The intent was also to create a timeless feel and to create a sequence that could have been made 50 years ago without expensive equipment or technology, suggesting the timelessness and extreme longevity of the vampire. Frames have been removed from sequences so that the images sometimes appear jerky and out of time (in a similar way to the movements of the vampires in the series itself), the editor Shawn Fedorchuk describing this as 'a beautiful kind of lunging staccato effect' (quoted on CreativeLeague News⁶). The atmosphere of the South was also emphasized in the specially created font that drew on hand-made roadside signs. As Ball says, these elements work together to 'immediately transport the viewer into the *True Blood* world where the conjured thematic images of sex, death and religious fervor blend' (CreativeLeague).

Telefantasy

This *True Blood* world is one that does not easily fit into a specific generic category, but is clearly identifiable as telefantasy. The series straddles the diffuse and shifting generic boundary between Gothic horror and paranormal romance. As Gothic horror, it is a blood-drenched, sexually charged narrative focusing on the adventures and misadventures of its heroine Sookie as she encounters several different kinds of supernatural and undead creatures, but most notably vampires, as well as kidnapping and attempts on her life from human serial killers and militant, anti-vampire, evangelical Christians – all figures and situations familiar from the horror genre. As paranormal romance, it is centred around the (ostensibly) human heroine's relationship with the vampire Bill Compton (or perhaps more specifically, Sookie's selection of libidinal and liminal potential lovers, the vampires Bill and Eric, the werewolf Alcide and the shapeshifter Sam).

Variations of the contemporary Gothic heroine are well established in telefantasy, especially as the typically feisty, individualistic and proactive form epitomized by the 'kick ass' style of vampire and demon slayer Buffy. In the case of *True Blood*, Sookie may not possess the highly trained and literally 'buff' body of Buffy, but she is a strategic negotiator who can draw on her telepathic abilities, stand up to and negotiate with vampires, cut the heads off serial killers and zap monsters with her awesome fairy light. Although there are clear differences from the Gothic heroine of classic literary texts, with contemporary Gothic heroines such as Sookie taking on many of the intrinsic characteristics of the action heroine and the final girl, a lineage is clear (Wheatley 2006, 159–60). The heroine of paranormal romance, on the other hand, is not quite so clear-cut in terms of her proactivity and may indeed be problematical in her passivity (as Bella is in the *Twilight* series, for example). Sookie, although clearly a paranormal romance heroine in consideration of her relationships with Bill and Eric, is certainly far more questioning and assertive than Bella, for instance. Nonetheless, Sookie remains a relatively straightforward paranormal romance heroine, attracted to a man who is stronger than she both physically and psychologically (because he is a vampire), who (in constantly having to overcome his dark vampiric nature) is a threat to their romance developing, if not to her bodily safety, and who appears to be deceitful or unfaithful (in *True Blood*, Bill is actually on a mission for his vampire queen to spy on Sookie).

In terms of genre, whether we classify *True Blood* as Gothic horror or paranormal romance, a mix of the two or neither, the narrative traits of the series mark it out as telefantasy. Following Matt Hills's definitions of telefantasy, *True Blood* has the 'perpetuated hermeneutic' (or 'endlessly deferred narrative') and the 'hyperdiegesis' of cult TV (2004, 101–4). Like the soap opera narrative, multiple plot threads weave throughout the series, there are cliff-hanger endings resolved in the following episode and even sex scenes are split across episode breaks. Furthermore, the main antagonist for

the following season is introduced at the end of the current one (as when Maryann and the pig distract Tara when she is driving home drunk at the end of season one and when Bill is kidnapped by the werewolves for Russell Edgington at the end of season two). The world of *True Blood* is also hyperdiegetic, the American Vampire League, the Magister and the Authority are more or less shadowy organizations that impose law and order on the vampire community, but are only hinted at in the narrative. In terms of the hyperdiegesis, such organizations suggest a much wider world than that depicted in the episodes.

Even more significantly, the marketing of the series provides additional extra-hyperdiegetic material. The viral advertising extends to a global diegesis, for example, vampires in Japan announcing the invention of Tru Blood and vampires in Eastern Europe caught on camera in the wake of the 'Great Revelation'. Mockumentary footage featuring characters from the series reacting to the coming-out of the vampires was also circulated in the run-up to the series premiere.⁹ Prior to season two, viral marketing featured show dogs, police dogs and seeing eye dogs alarmingly shifting back to human form while working.¹⁰ Such material seemingly locates the coming-out of the vampires in the real world (Digital Kitchen's billboards for season two also advertised versions of actual products such as Gillette razors, Harley Davidson motorbikes and Geico insurance specifically for vampires¹¹) and gave the illusion of extending the hyperdiegesis into the real world.

Investigating *True Blood*

Whilst the chapters in this collection do not directly discuss the cult status of *True Blood*, they all touch on one or several of the topic areas outlined above. *True Blood* is a rich narrative that can be analysed on many levels and accordingly the book is divided into four sections. The first of these looks at the stylistics of the series. Stacey Abbott considers *True Blood* as an HBO

series, exploiting the cutting-edge nature of the channel. She argues that the televisual is based on domestic space and on intimate close-up shots and that Gothic television exploits this in creating its homely horrors. She goes on to explore the way graphic horror and gore are amplified in key scenes in the series through extreme close-ups in particular. Furthermore, she looks at the way the televisual is portrayed within the narrative of *True Blood* itself in order to depict the TV vampire as all the more monstrous. Caroline Ruddell and I then explore the series as a hybrid of the Southern Gothic, one that plays with landscape and the Gothic edifice to construct a Southern Gothic milieu that also embodies the traditional Gothic and the contemporary 'goth'. In keeping with the way its heroine is a sun-worshipper and its romantic heroes 'creatures of the night', we explore these oppositions as encoded in the settings, costumes and other stylistic elements of the series. We look at the way *True Blood* radiates heat on several levels, drawing on, sometimes inverting and always problematizing the binary of light and dark.

The second section focuses on the way *True Blood* draws on a range of intertexts to create varying sets of meanings. Mikel Koven positions the series as fairytale and looks at the origins of popular culture vampires in folktales. Sookie may be part fairy, but Koven presents an interesting case for the vampire as a 'big evil fairy'. In this reading, *True Blood* works in the same way as the folktale, positioning various supernatural creatures alongside humans to explore intolerance and other social criticisms of the real world. Gregory Erickson then considers the ways in which the series incorporates acts of religion. He considers the way that fears and desires connected to sex, death, blood, salvation and immortality are inextricably linked to religious feelings and experiences, and parallels these with the 'event of the vampire' in the diegesis of *True Blood*. He asks us to consider the way in which the series forces us to rethink categories of life and death and the borders of the human and the divine. Finally in this section Dennis Rothermel explores the ways in which *True Blood* works as minoritarian romantic fable.

Various characters in the series negotiate the boundaries across and between different social structures. He draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to argue that the series thus reflects political strife centring on difference.

The chapters in the third section look at the way the series approaches identity. *True Blood* has been widely discussed in terms of its representations of race and sexuality. These chapters do not, however, simply analyse representation in a straightforward way but approach questions of identity in relation to genre and society. Ananya Mukherjea looks at how *True Blood* portrays the romantic hero of the paranormal romance. She considers the trajectory of Sookie's role as romantic heroine alongside the 'dangerous lovers' that Bill and Eric represent. They are both Byronic heroes offering mystery and suspense to the viewer, but they also raise the possibility of active identity-formation. In their paranormal, and indeed grotesque, status they allow Sookie to evolve. Victoria Amador returns to Southern Gothic literature in her chapter and contextualizes *True Blood* with respect to the Deep South and grotesque characters of Flannery O'Connor's writing. Focusing on issues of race and class, Amador considers the shifting Southern perspectives in the series, particularly in relation to tolerance and acceptance. She looks at the way several characters in *True Blood* reflect those in O'Connor's work, though in a contemporary context that reflects a pluralist and multiracial worldview. Rounding off this section, Darren Elliott-Smith considers how *True Blood's* out, queer characters impact on the representations of homosexuality in the vampire genre. Sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, has always been encoded as the key subtext of the vampire genre, but Elliott-Smith asks what happens to the vampire-as-metaphor for homosexuality when *True Blood* brings gay, lesbians, bi- and omni-sexualities out into the open. He argues that this opens up a paradox and constructs hierarchies of difference within the group in addition to those already existing between groups.

The final section of the collection includes chapters which consider the viewers and fans of the series. By way