



Nick Prescott's Reviews

True Blood – Season One (DVD)

Talent: Anna Paquin, Stephen Moyer, Sam Trammell, Ryan Kwanten, Rutina Wesley, William Sanderson.

Date of review: Thursday 28th May, 2009

Directors: Alan Ball et al.

Genre: Horror/Supernatural

Period: Contemporary

Duration: 150 minutes

Classification: R

We rate it: 3 and a half stars.

The obsession with Vampires continues here, in the shape of this enormously popular HBO production, which has just hit our shelves on DVD. With the Twilight phenomenon by no means over, and with the second and third films for that series already in production, the 21st-Century vampiric cycle, it would seem, is going to be running strong for some time. HBO has joined the league of studios busily resurrecting this genre (if you'll excuse the pun) and it seems like just the right kind of television studio to make a vampire series, as it's a cable-based enterprise, and is not bound by the kinds of censorship restrictions that govern free-to-air shows. This fact explains that the first thing viewers will discover about True Blood: it is very, very confronting indeed.

Based on a phenomenally popular series of novels by Charlaine Harris (the series began with "Dead Until Dark", which was published in 2003) True Blood revolves around the character of Sookie Stackhouse, here played by the wonderful Anna Paquin (who has certainly grown up since she played Holly Hunter's daughter in The Piano). Sookie is a waitress in a deep-South bayou-type community, and she has an odd talent: she can hear people's thoughts. This helps her when she has to sort out the trashy creeps from the genuinely nice people she encounters in her work as a waitress, but it causes her some puzzlement when she meets Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) whose mind is entirely closed to her. It's not an enormous surprise to her (or to us) to learn that he's a vampire. Their relationship develops in all sorts of surprising ways, and is off to a flying start when Sookie rescues Bill from a pair of white-trash thugs who are trying to drain the vampire's blood.

The interesting premise of this show is as follows: it's the near-future, and the United States has entered into a strange period wherein vampires have come out of the closet, as it were, having engineered synthetic blood and thus ended their reliance on humans

for 'food'. They live among the rest of the populace, buy their blood-substitute at gas stations, and are protected by a group that campaigns in the political arena for Vampires' Rights. This isn't to say that the bloodsuckers themselves can't still be scary, and much of what makes the first few episodes of True Blood so unnerving is not just the ominous expressions the fanged ones carry around with them, but the way that the full-frontal vampiric attitudes to sexuality are depicted. Vampire blood (or "V-juice", as the humans refer to it) has become legendary for its aphrodisiac properties, you see, thus there's an illicit trade in the stuff; some nasty humans try to drain the more peaceful vampires in order to traffic in their blood and trade in the kind of no-holds-barred sexual activity the blood enables humans to indulge in; meanwhile the vamps themselves are prized by lonely humans for their extraordinary sexual prowess. Vampires have always been about sex, of course, and it's no different here; in fact, True Blood must stand as the most provocatively in-your-face vampire tale since some of the Hammer horror films of the 1970s. No nudity is spared here, and the weak of stomach, or those easily offended by raucous (or indeed sometimes downright violent) depictions of sex should be warned to stay away.

Alan Ball (he of American Beauty fame) is perhaps the last person I would have imagined would be involved in a show like this, but he has made True Blood work very well on its own very odd terms. Confronting, funny, unnerving and engaging in the strangest ways, this is neither for the faint-hearted nor for those under eighteen, but for those interested in the more extreme edges of pop-culture's current number-one obsession.

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