

Rob Buckley reviews HBO's latest offering,

# TRUE BLOOD

**I**f you want to talk about sexual taboos on television, sometimes the safest way to do it is to talk about vampires instead. Ever since Bram Stoker popularised the vampire in Western literature, touching on issues of sexuality and desire that Victorian society was less than comfortable with, books, films and TV shows have continued to use the metaphor of the carnal, blood-sucking vampire as way of dealing with the forbidden, whether it's been male or female homosexuality, STDs or simply sexual desire itself.

New HBO series *True Blood*, adapted by Alan Ball from the 'Sookie Stackhouse' series of books by Charlaine Harris, continues in this vein – pun intended – while magically reversing it.

The basic premise of the show, currently airing in the US but still to be acquired by a UK broadcaster, is that a form of synthetic blood has been invented in Japan. With humans apparently having been safely removed from the menu, vampires have chosen to come 'out of the closet' – or coffin, at any rate. Yet many humans remain apprehensive and unsure if vampires have really changed their ways. Religious leaders and governments around the world have chosen their sides, but in the small Louisiana town of Bon Temps, the jury is still out.

Waitress Sookie Stackhouse (played by Anna Paquin of *The Piano* fame) knows how it feels to be ostracised. Able to listen to people's thoughts, she's also open-minded about the integration of vampires – particularly when it comes to Bill Compton (British actor Stephen Moyer, best known in the UK from Channel 4's *NY:LON* but no stranger to playing nuanced vampires thanks to that channel's earlier *Ultraviolet*), a handsome 175-year-old living up the road.

The show is essentially a blend of two different strands: the Sookie Stackhouse books, which are really mystery stories and romances for girls and younger women, in which the ever-so-perfect, spirited Sookie and the dark, brooding Bill fall in love

(although Sookie soon moves on to werewolves and other creatures of the night); and darker, more adult material from Ball.

The Sookie and Bill romance still remains intact in the show, with the virginal Sookie, always dressed in white, finally able to be herself with the one man – or almost man – whose mind she cannot read. Bill, for his part, is mesmerised by Sookie and her otherness. Not only is she unafraid of him, she's immune to his powers of persuasion: she is, to put it simply, hard to get.

But it's the transcendence of this original material by Ball that makes the show more than simply teen girl fantasy or a retread of earlier shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, which also featured a perky, super-great blonde heroine and her relationship with a dark brooding, pasty-faced vampire. Ball, who created the acclaimed *Six Feet Under*, uses the vampire motif as a way to explore intolerance towards various minorities, but in a far less obvious way than might have been expected.

## Metaphors

The most literal metaphors are mentions of the "vampire rights act" going through Congress, even though many Americans don't believe vampires should have the right to vote; there are "vampire rights" spokespeople omnipresent on the TV news channels; and vampires are shunned and stereotyped by everyone in Bon Temps except Sookie, with Bill nearly killed in the first episode by two local criminals. The obvious link here is to the struggle for civil rights in the 60s.

Had that been the extent of the metaphor, *True Blood* would have been a shallow and dull show that merely tried to reinforce a message that we've already heard countless times before: don't oppress minorities, don't stereotype them, because they're just like us.

Instead, Ball's *True Blood* is a more interesting exploration of sexuality: the vampires aren't really just like us – plenty of them are still murderous, treat human as cattle, are willing to feed on babies and they get up to pretty extreme sexual practices, which Ball – and the always venturous HBO – has few hesitations about depicting. Ball, who is openly gay, is using the show to put forward a far less commonly considered question through the use of vampire as metaphor for gay men: it's all very well to consider yourself liberal and tolerant, but if you saw our bad side as well as our good and everything we did in explicit detail, would you be so tolerant then?

## Vampires

It's the question the supposedly open-minded Sookie has to deal with as she faces death at the hands of Bill's fellow vampires and one of their 'cattle', finds her own friends being killed and sees her priapismic brother's lovers continually being wiped out by vampires. Can she really have a relationship with a vampire? Are they really all bad deep down after all?

Other more minor metaphors pervade. Sookie's brother Jason, who seemingly hates vampires, soon finds that watching vampire porn gives him – and his lovers – ideas. But soon he can't get the vampires out of his head, pushing him on a quest for Viagra to restore his previous potency – when, of course, he needs something else. Sookie, when she opens up to Bill and drinks some of his blood, soon finds her experimentation takes her libido to new heights.

However, the show isn't all metaphor. Many of the minor characters are as interesting as the show's main characters,

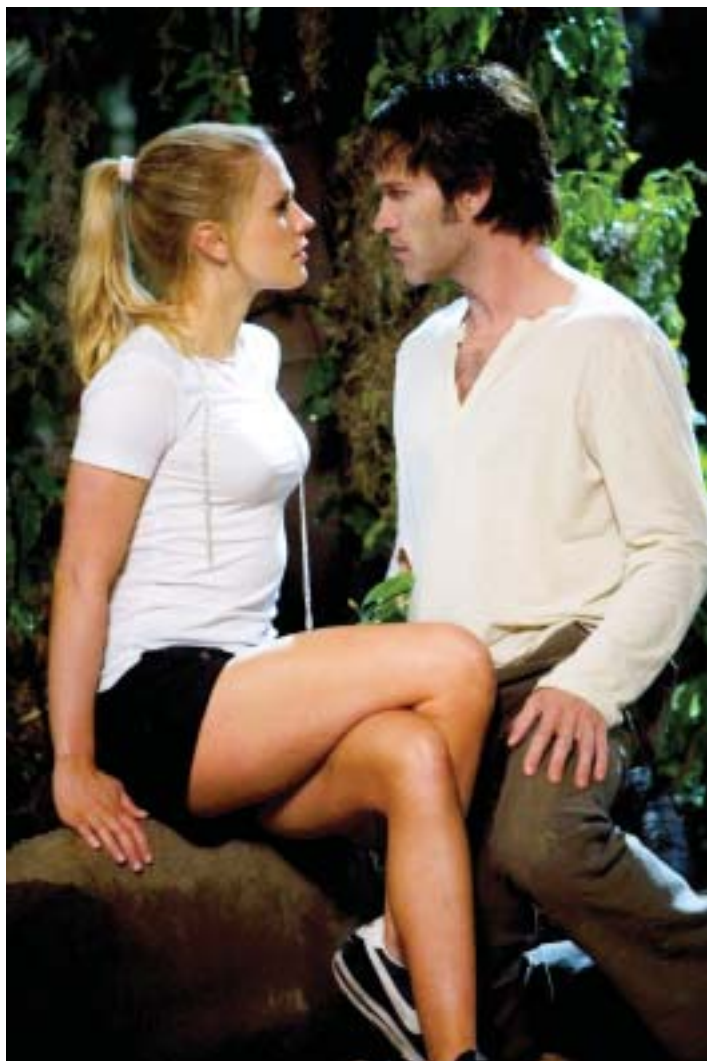
## 'Popcorn for smart people', says 'Six Feet Under' creator Alan Ball

with Sookie's spikey black best friend, Tara (Rutina Wesley), having to look after an alcoholic mother who beats her; and Jason's struggles with the police and the local vampire-blood dealer – blood being something of an aphrodisiac – are one of the show's main sources of humour. The fact that Bill's family owned slaves when he was still alive also serves as an interesting way to show that the horrors of the past aren't that far off.

### Faults

*True Blood* isn't without faults. Sookie's perfection is irritating and Bill's brooding passiveness is merely tedious. The terrible tussles faced by the cast in dealing with the Louisiana accent mean some miss by a mile while others manage to achieve the most overly Southern accents since television was invented. The show itself is a seething mass of stereotypes: Tara is 'uppity'; gay chef Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis) is the first port of call for recreational drugs; and just about every Southerner appears to be stupid, intolerant and an Olympic-class bedhopper into bondage, rough sex, fake rapes, et al.

Yet *True Blood* is refreshingly different enough – and sexually explicit enough – that HBO commissioned a second series of it on the strength of the ratings for its first two episodes alone. Whether the show will continue with its vampire themes or move on to other creatures of the night – and minorities – though is something that will undoubtedly emerge in time. **an**



▲ Anna Paquin (Sookie Stackhouse) with fellow cast member Sam Trammell as Sam Merlotte.

## The Dynamic Regeneration of CROYDON

**With a population of over a third of a million people Croydon is the largest London Borough. It is a place with a real buzz and an exciting place in which to live relax and work. It is also an inclusive borough with residents from a wide range of ethnic origins using 191 different languages.**

The Borough is currently experiencing one of the most dynamic regeneration and growth periods ever seen by any city in the UK. Currently some £3.6bn has been committed, with much more in the development pipeline.

Croydon also boasts one of the largest retail centres in the south east outside central London. With 2.5 million sq.ft of shopping space and an estimated catchment population of 1.5 million, Croydon is one of the country's top shopping centres.

East Croydon is one of the busiest stations in the UK with fast and frequent rail services to London, Gatwick and the South Coast, and in May 2000 Croydon became the first London borough to reintroduce trams. The £200m, environmentally-friendly light rail system Tramlink has been an outstanding solution to traffic congestion, and regularly carries more than 50,000 passengers a day. An extension to the system is scheduled for 2012/17, and Croydon looks set to benefit from the New Cross Gate link of the proposed East London line scheduled post 2012.

The Borough has long since recognised that its future economic growth will require more than good transport links and serviced plots of land to attract inward investors. Croydon understands and appreciates the need to provide good quality environments that will attract and retain highly skilled workers. It has become the most important location for financial services in London outside the City, already attracts over 140,000 workers and has a GDP of some £2.5bn.

Despite the economic down-turn the signs are good and steps have been taken to secure the future economic prosperity of the Borough, so vital to attract inward investment and create an environment that offers good quality housing, education, shopping, leisure and cultural opportunities.

The Council recognises that a new city is built on strong communities, excellent education standards, and opportunities for young people to grow, learn, engage and enjoy growing up. Ambitious plans for developing integrated education and children's services have been produced which recognise that the young people of Croydon are the ones who will build a great city and maintain it as a fantastic place to live. More than 52,000 pupils attend 120 state schools in Croydon - more than any other London borough and standards compare favourably with national and London averages.

### Investment

Substantial funds are being invested in education but the investment is not just in buildings, but young peoples' futures. The Council intends that every school will be better served in future and is investing in people and support systems that will ensure that all children succeed. In schools, there is a clear focus on developing leadership skills at all levels and improving the quality of learning and teaching. Centrally there is a targeted drive to recruit high calibre professionals who have the determination to turn Europe's largest town into a new city.

The Council is currently advertising several senior posts that require substantial and varied experience from prospective candidates but is equally interested in hearing from newly-qualified teachers keen to establish their career in a vibrant and exciting place to be. Particularly good induction and support systems ensure those new entrants to the profession quickly progress to promoted posts.