**Book Reviews**

**Cold, Sparkly, and Dangerous to Know: The Vampire Boyfriends of True Blood & Twilight**

by Pamela O’Donnell


So, why the undead? At first glance it would seem that feminists and vampires have little in common. What some might see as the signifiers of feminism, at least of the Second Wave sort — earnestness, herbal tea, and Birkenstocks — could never be confused with those of the vampire — amorality, blood, and black leather. As good critical theorists, however, we are taught to challenge false binaries, wherever they occur. In this instance we can recognize that feminists and vampires have more in common than originally assumed. (An aversion to suntans, for example, or the uncomfortable role of outsider in a patriarchal, capitalistic society.) As Margot Adler noted in her recently published *Vampires Are Us*, an exploration of our “love affair with the immortal dark side,” vampires have a lot to say about “issues of power, sensuality, identity, spirituality, and the environment” (preface).

Edited by Brigid Cherry, a senior lecturer in film and popular culture at St. Mary’s University, London, *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* brings together twelve essays on the HBO series, which is produced by Alan Ball and based on the Southern Vampire Mysteries of Charlaine Harris. As contributor Mikel Koven notes, “What makes *True Blood* more interesting than any of the other vampire-oriented television series in recent years (beyond the sex and gore in the show) is what the series appears to say about racial and sexual integration. It is not a hard stretch to read the television series as Southern-born Ball’s fantasy South where racial and sexual differences are displaced onto the living-impaired community” (pp. 64–65).

Cherry provides a context for this investigation of the first four seasons of the series in the book’s introduction, offering background information on the channel, the show, the actors, and both Ball and Harris, in addition to an extended description of *True Blood*’s title sequence.

The first section of the book covers genre and style, opening with an essay by Stacey Abbott that decodes HBO’s use of the vampire to maintain its reputation for extra-ordinary television. Along the way, Abbott reveals, “Vampires become sympathetic in *True Blood*, not because they are struggling against their condition and resisting the thirst…but because they are victims of prejudice” (p. 34). The exploration of genre continues with a chapter by Caroline Ruddell and editor Cherry on the Southern Gothic milieu of *True Blood* — with its heated climate and even more heated relationships (p. 41). American readers will, on occasion, be forced to translate the accurate but anomalous vocabulary employed by the British authors. For example, in the sentence, “Jason is bare-chested under his fluorescent road crew waistcoat,” the reader has to step out of the text long enough to convert that mental image into a “safety vest” (p. 42).

The second section of the book, covering myths and meanings, features essays by Mikel Koven, who traces the folklore and fairytale tropes of the series and proposes that “vampires...
are, in their genetic make-up, big evil fairies” (p. 67); Gregory Erickson, who writes on the absence of the divine, postulating that “[i]nstead of presenting religious themes through the Church or Christian belief, True Blood offers acts of sacramentalism, of ritual and of transcendence through sex, violence, desire and drugs” (p. 75); and Dennis Rothermel, who uses the conceptual tools of Deleuze, Guattari, Nancy, Rancière, and Badiou to entomb his analysis of “minoritarian romantic fables” in French theory (p. 90).

Characters and identities are the focus of the third section, which opens with Ananya Mukherjea’s take on the paranormal, yet Byronic, men of the show. Victoria Amador tries to untangle depictions of race and class in the series in an essay that is more description than analysis. This section closes with a compelling chapter by Darren Elliot-Smith on the homosexual vampire as metaphor for the…homosexual vampire (p. 139). Although challenging to condense, Elliot-Smith’s basic argument is “that in representing an assimilative heteronormativity the show ceases to offer the same essentialist threat to heteronormativity that the metaphorical vampire-as-homosexual might once have done. Rather True Blood is performing a ‘bisexual, sexually exotic, polymorphic and polysemous’ threat that is no longer exclusive to the homosexual subject” (p. 142, citation omitted). However, the privileging of committed, white, male, gay, upper-class couples in the queer hierarchy of True Blood underscores the fact that the supernatural community of Bon Temps remains “deeply divided along lines of diversity” (p. 152).

The final three essays in the book are devoted to marketing and fandom. U. Melissa Anyiwo should be commended for her exceptionally clear prose and useful summation of Henry Jenkins’ theory of convergence in her study of True Blood’s transmedia storytelling. Maria Mellins continues the exploration of the fan experience and identity by interviewing club-goers at London’s Fangtasia, a “tactile, real-world tribute to the True Blood universe” (p. 177). The publication concludes with Erin Hollis’s chapter on “archontic” fan fiction. Drawing on the work of Abigail Derecho, Hollis investigates the differences between the television series and its source material, Harris’s novels, revealing how these “dual canons” open up a liminal space within which fans can create their own reality. Although none of the authors in this volume incorporate a strictly feminist reading of the text(s), the essays do provide illuminating analyses of issues of identity (race, class, and gender) and practice.

In addition to season synopses of the series and an episode guide through Season 4, the volume includes an index. It is a worthy addition to any collection supporting scholars who are interested in what depictions of the paranormal reveal about twenty-first-century American culture.

In Theorizing Twilight, the vampires under discussion are not the only hybrids. In the introduction, editors Maggie Parke and Natalie Wilson reveal that they “aimed for a middle-ground between dense academese and frivolity” in the hope that the resulting essays “are enter-
taining but enlightening, thought-provoking but user-friendly” (p. 2). Overlooking the fact that language has devolved to the point where the phrase “user-friendly” can be applied to a book, most of the fifteen essays in *Theorizing Twilight* successfully straddle both worlds. Fans, critics, and scholars of Stephenie Meyer’s work will all find something useful and engaging in these pages, although the fans may be disenchanted by the feminist critique of their favorite vampire clan. What cannot be denied is that the editors force fans and scholars alike to consider these cultural artifacts in a more nuanced and complicated way.

Part I of the book, “*Twilight* as Pop Cultural Artifact: Pilgrimages, Fan Culture, and Film Adaptations,” opens with an engaging essay by Tanya Erzen, an associate professor at Ohio State, who takes a field trip (a rare enough occurrence for media scholars) to Forks, Washington, the purported home of the Cullen family in the *Twilight* books and films. She describes how “*Twilight* tourism defies neat boundaries between fantasy and franchise, the supernatural and everyday,” while underscoring the “ongoing negotiation of authenticity and experience” that occurs between fans and residents (pp. 21, 12). Erzen has produced a fascinating study of the intersections of teen ardor and capitalism, of racial disparity and the illusion of authenticity.

The first section continues with an essay by co-editor Maggie Parke, who dissects the vital role played by fans in creating the *Twilight* phenomena and argues that Hollywood studios must cater to fan expectations if their films are to achieve blockbuster status. Heather Anastasiu offers a psychoanalytic inquiry into the popularity of *Twilight*, noting the “lush exploration” of sexual longing in the novel, what Christine Seifert of *Bitch* magazine refers to as “abstinence porn” (p. 47). Anastasiu analyzes the author, the text, and the reader (both adolescent and adult) before concluding, rather simplistically, that the “text dramatically reflects humankind’s most basic drives and the need to negotiate between id desires and super-ego responsibilities” while allowing for “vicarious participation in the hero’s journey of self-actualization” (p. 53). She defends her interpretation as providing a necessary balance against criticisms of the gendered and heteronormative constructs in the *Twilight* franchise (criticisms we will find aplenty in later portions of the book).

And speaking of heteronormativity, Colette Murphy’s quirky chapter on our “lovesick infatuation with prince-like vampires” explores how media has simply re-costumed the vampire as the “heterosexual male romantic lead” (pp. 56, 57). While Edward remains a “prince,” Murphy posits that Edward’s love, Bella, serves
as the true hero of the tale, the character who transitions from mere damsel to powerful vampire, albeit a vampire wife and mother. Ananya Mukherjea, who contributed to the Brigid Cherry collection reviewed above, makes another appearance here, with a chapter entitled “Team Bella: Fans Navigating Desire, Security, and Feminism.” Beginning with her own reading of the *Twilight* phenomena and “its conservative and anti-feminist underpinnings,” she then surveys twenty fans of the novels, fourteen of whom identified as feminist, to try and better understand the appeal of Meyer’s work (pp. 70, 74). In the course of her investigation, Mukherjea discovers that “the overt abstinence-until-marriage message of the franchise, so disturbing to me, does not necessarily prevent fans from using the story as an outlet for their own desires,” and that the security afforded by Edward is not perceived as controlling, but rather comforting to young fans who still vividly recall the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (pp. 75, 81). Despite her reservations about the books’ anti-feminist and homophobic elements, Mukherjea is persuaded that the series does provide a “secure outlet” for fans to “indulge and explore important desires and personal boundaries” (p. 82).

Part II (“Once Upon a *Twilight*”) focuses on the literary context of the novels, with contributors debating which characters best evoke the romantic Byronic hero. It opens, however, with an essay by Ashley Benning on the subject of age in the series. After several digressions, Benning gets down to her analysis, noting in particular that adults, both mortal and immortal, have a limited ability to serve as leaders or protectors of their families (p. 95). At the end of the essay, she again changes course and discusses the multi-generational appeal of the story (and young-adult literature in general), before concluding with a description of the attendees and programming at TwiCon, the 2009 convention devoted to all things *Twilight*.

Angela Tenga, an assistant professor at the Florida Institute of Technology, also places *Twilight* in a bookish context, but in this case she argues that the nineteenth-century novels and fairy tales admired by Stephenie Meyer “inform not just the imaginary space of the *Twilight* novels, but the very imagination of their protagonist” and that, as a result, Bella’s “autonomous vision of self is limited by women’s roles in these fictions” (pp. 102, 103). She goes on to apply psychoanalytic theory to the character of Bella, diagnosing her with Dependent Personality Disorder (DPD) and an unhealthy devotion to the novels of Jane Austen. Tenga acknowledges that feminists may find Bella an inappropriate role model for young readers, but counters that by “the standards of her own fictional models…Bella reaches her goals and receives the classic rewards: marriage, motherhood, and upward mobility” (p. 113).

The comparisons between *Twilight* and nineteenth-century British fiction continue with Sarah Wakefield’s examination of *Wuthering Heights*. Wakefield traces the connections between the two stories, with Edward as a slightly more evolved Edgar Linton and Jacob, the werewolf, replacing the id-driven Heathcliff. Issues of race and class remain, but “by combining the best of their features into two men who can stay in the heroine’s life,” Wakefield argues that in the *Twilight* series, Meyer successfully resolves Cathy Earnshaw’s eternal dilemma (p. 129).

In “Rewriting the Byronic Hero,” Jessica Groper argues that despite his outward appearance as a brooding vampire, Edward Cullen is, in fact, the exact opposite of a Byronic hero (p. 132). While admitting the existence of “Byronic impulses,” Groper delineates the numerous ways in which Edward rejects this mantle; he is unselfish, chaste, moral, law-abiding, and integrated into society. She concludes that “Meyer takes the Byronic hero archetypic and instead of warning her readers away from him, she reforms him into someone safe and dependable” (pp. 144–145).

Hila Shachar, investigating *Twilight* as a post-feminist romance, believes the novels “ultimately participate in a post-feminist backlash that recycles traditional notions of love, masculinity and femininity” (p. 148). Refuting the previous author’s perception of Edward as “safe and dependable,” Shachar implies that he is little more than a rapist, “literally imprinting himself upon his victim’s flesh, as if she were an object” (p.158). By the essay’s end, she encourages readers to question essentialist thinking, which does not recognize the “naturally desirable” as a cultural construct (p. 160).

By Part III (“*Twilight* Through an Intersectional Lens”), the editors’ stated goal of creating a “user-friendly” book for fans and scholars alike is all but abandoned, with five dense chapters on such light-hearted [not!] topics as patriarchy, white privilege, and rape culture. Melissa Miller, who is writing her dissertation on *Twilight*, claims that the saga “promotes a dangerous and damaging ideology of patriarchy that normalizes and rationalizes the control of women by men” (p. 165). She goes on to enumerate the ways in which Edward exhibits the controlling behavior of an abuser, while engaging with various seminal critics (Mulvey, Gerbner, etc.) to posit that the media, by offering up Edward Cullen as the ideal boyfriend, are encouraging impressionable consumers to seek out potentially violent mates (p. 174).
Ashley Donnelly, an assistant professor at Ball State, continues the exploration of patriarchal privilege and heteronormativity in the novels. She seems to believe that without scholarly intervention, “these oppressive ideologies [will] engrain themselves in the collective unconscious” (p. 192). Co-editor Natalie Wilson’s contribution to the volume traces the binaries of Edward Cullen/Jacob Black, vampire/werewolf, light/dark, ego/id and how these constructs work to reinforce white privilege and the “othering” of the werewolves as noble savages. She provides a brief history of the werewolf and a fascinating synopsis of the “racialized beliefs” in the Book of Mormon, before concluding, “The ideology of Twilight serves at least in part to champion and bolster white privilege and to keep the wofly Other firmly in his half-naked place” (pp. 202, 206).

In the penultimate chapter, Anne Torkelson, another dissertator, this time from the University of Minnesota Duluth, casts a critical eye over Twilight’s normalizing and romanticizing of violence toward women (p. 210). In addition to Bella’s self-esteem issues, Torkelson uses the story of every female vampire character to support her contention that women are repeatedly denied agency in choosing their fate. She also mines the message boards and comment sections of several Twilight-related websites to reveal how readers often accept the myths of a rape culture (p. 213).

Theorizing Twilight closes with an essay by Lindsey Issow Averill, of Keiser University, on Twilight as a retelling of the story of Adam and Eve, but one “where the female body and female fecundity are completely erased, while male reproduction remains intact” (p. 225). She argues that for a woman to achieve the ultimate existence as a vampire, she must kill her womb, commit gynocide (p. 235).

Some of the essays in this final section read like an arms race of outrage, an opportunity for new scholars to establish their street cred by tearing into a problematic cultural artifact, focusing on its flaws to justify a righteous indignation. It remains to be seen if this tactic proves effective in reaching an audience more interested in debating the finer points of Team Edward versus Team Jacob. That being said, the editors have included a thoughtful selection of essays on the controversial and polysemic Twilight saga, and this book offers much for feminists to ponder. Without doubt, the issues raised and subjects explored make this volume a worthy addition to any collection.

[Pamela O’Donnell reads a lot of vampire fiction, an indulgence that only occasionally interferes with her day job as an academic librarian. She holds an M.A. in Library & Information Studies and an M.A. in Communications (Media & Cultural Studies) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.]