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## **THE TELEVISION THAT DRIPPED BLOOD**

**TRUE BLOOD: INVESTIGATING VAMPIRES AND SOUTHERN GOTHIC, BRIGID CHERRY (ED, 2012)**

**London: I.B. Tauris, 213pp.**

**ISBN: 9781848859401, p/bk**

**TV HORROR: INVESTIGATING THE DARK SIDE OF THE SMALL SCREEN, LORNA JOWETT AND STACEY ABBOT (2013)**

**London: I.B. Tauris, 270pp.**

**ISBN: 9781848856189, p/bk**

*Reviewed by John Paul Green, University of Sunderland*

Today there is a generation of British 40-somethings, for whom the mention of television horror will summon up memories of Saturday night double-bills of Universal and Hammer movies: cinematic gems being revealed for the first time on the small screen. For actual 'television horror', we had to look no further than *Doctor Who* (1963-89, 1995, 2005- ), *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-75) and *Hammer House of Horror* (1980). During the 1970s we were spoilt for choice in terms of horror on the box, both fictional and 'real', usually courtesy of the British Public Information Film department that turned farmyards into death-traps, where children picked off one by one in scenes reminiscent of the *Final Destination* (2000-11) films (for a truly terrifying experience, see *Apaches*, 1977).

Rick Worland noted that 'network television became a source for influential horror/fantasy storytelling' (Worland, 2007: 91) and it's true that horror has been a staple ingredient on television certainly since the early 1950s. Reviewing a double-bill of television horror collections from I. B. Tauris—*TV Horror: Investigating the Dark Side of the Small Screen* edited by Stacey Abbot and Lorna Jowett, and *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* edited by Brigit Cherry—is as rewarding as those late night partnerships of Universal/Hammer on the BBC, offering as they do a mixture of vintage television alongside more contemporary examples. Given the wealth of academic material now available on 'cult' television, which predominantly focus on science fiction and fantasy shows, both these entries to the *Investigating...* series from I. B. Tauris are particularly welcome.

Horror has been well served in cinematic studies and while the genre inevitably blurs with science fiction and fantasy, Abbott's and Jowett's comprehensive study on televisual horror is both timely, in terms of horror's renaissance on television over the last fifteen years, and a long time coming. As Mark Jancovich noted 'it was on television that the really interesting developments in horror were taking place in shows such as *The X Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' (Jancovich, 2002:7). Indeed, horror hasn't been neglected in terms of academic studies, as the volume of books based around *Buffy* (1997-2001) and *The X Files* (1993-2002) testify, but in terms of addressing the broader issues around horror, particularly in relation to its televisuality and place in the domestic sphere, Jowett's and Abbott's book makes a significant contribution to the field. The focus is very much on television's unique qualities in terms of representing horror and struggles to engage in more recent debates around

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'cinematic TV', while still utilising the language of film studies to examine at length, the aesthetics of *Buffy* and *Dexter* (2006-13). Their insistence on focusing on the televisuality of horror is wholly acceptable for much of the output during the 1950s-1990s, but does seem a little out-dated in terms of more recent TV shows. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for example was being regarded as an example of cinematic television as early as Deborah Thomas' study of 2006, which regarded Joss Whedon and his show as 'aspiring to the condition of film' (Thomas, 2006: 173). Recently, *The Walking Dead* (2010- ) has relied on the aesthetics of cinematic zombie films and graphic novels in its adaptation of the comic book series. Ultimately this approach doesn't harm the study, but at the same time, doesn't fully explore the idea that TV itself is, and has been, breaking away from its own confines, arguably since the early 1990s.

The moral panic surrounding horror in the home has a long history, from the EC comics of the 1950s (Barker, 1992) to the video nasty scare of the early 1980s (see Egan, 2007). The relationship between horror and the domestic space is developed by Abbott and Jowett, but they are careful not to fall into the tired debates around media effects and instead, pursue the more interesting and rewarding line of enquiry around the limitations and tensions of the genre, where the authors acknowledge that the 'relationship between horror and television is... fraught with tension and potential' (xiii) and are careful in avoiding tired debates around the potential 'harm' of such horrors entering the domestic space. They instead examine the 'many approaches and formations of the genre' (ibid), focusing their attention almost exclusively on British and American examples. While the book is not structured chronologically, it does provide an impressive overview of the field, from the 1950s through to 2012. If anything, the most frustrating aspect of the book, and by no means the fault of the authors, is that had the book been released this year, could have engaged with more recent TV horrors such as *Hannibal* (2013-), *American Horror Story* (2011-) and the woeful *Dracula* (2013).

As already noted, *TV Horror* focuses on UK and US television, acknowledging their respective contribution to the genre, in terms of quantity if not quality, but the authors don't fully engage with cultural differences between British horror and American horror. While there is an interesting chapter on contemporary Gothic (something taken up more fully in Brigid Cherry's *Investigating True Blood*) which does at least acknowledge the difference between British and American 'southern' Gothic, too often the horror discussed seems to show no cultural distinction or specificity.

The book frustrates only in terms of trying to cover too much ground, as if it were attempting to address the 'whole' of TV horror in one volume, making up for the lack of such a general study in previous years. Inevitably there are areas which could have been addressed further, such as the anthology series which is paid lip-service but isn't fully fleshed out. There are also awkward moments, particularly in the discussion of the horror auteur. Apart from questioning the significant role of the auteur or 'show-runner' in television, my further concern is the selection process for such inclusion into the 'club'. While it's natural and fitting that Rod Serling and Nigel Kneale are paid homage, I do question the placing of Steven Moffat into this category, while Dan Curtis for example, is afforded only a couple of paragraphs. Given the coverage *Doctor Who* already receives, his exclusion would hardly be missed in favour of other 'auteurs'.

As an overall study of the genre, the book is very successful, and while there is a tendency to focus on shows that have already been covered at length previously in text-specific collections, notably *Buffy*, *Doctor Who* and *The X Files*, for the student and teacher, Jowett and Abbott's work is both accessible and informative and whets the appetite for more. In an already overcrowded market of *Investigating...*, *Reading...* and *... and Philosophy*' books, *TV Horror* is of genuine interest and significance. It offers a broad history of the genre on the box, its development and transformation and provides a stepping-stone to further study in the area.

Whereas *TV Horror* covers a lot of ground, Cherry's *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* unsurprisingly offers a more focused study of one show, albeit within a broader framework that acknowledges not only other vampire fiction, but also the American Gothic tradition. I have always had mixed feelings about such collections, particularly those studies which engage with relatively new shows. There is always the whiff of cashing-in in the air. On the other hand they do provide an acknowledgement of the importance (and of course, popularity) of telefantasy, which is no longer seen as so niche or insignificant that it's only ever discussed in the pages of *SFX* or *Fangoria*. I. B. Tauris is at the forefront of such collections and their prolific output, goes from the sublime (see Matt Hills' *Triumph of a Timelord* 2010) to the ridiculous (Graham Sleight's *The Doctor's Monsters* 2012). Thankfully, Cherry's edited collection falls mostly in the former.

Cherry has gathered together some strong pieces for this collection and while they don't always fit neatly into 'Southern Gothic' framework, which itself becomes frustratingly limited in its appeal rather than providing structure for the contributions, there is at least the sense that the 'parts' indeed help rather than hinder the 'whole'. Stacey Abbott's chapter, 'TV Loves Fangs: The Televisuality of HBO Horror' not only offers a companion piece to her work in *TV Horror*, it also provides an interesting examination of the audiences relationship to the vampire figure, drawing comparisons between *True Blood*'s Bill Compton, with *Dark Shadows*' (1966-1971) Barnabas Collins and unsurprisingly *Buffy*'s (or *Angel*'s for that matter) Angel.

The main concern of the collection is the ways in which *True Blood* deals with issues around race, racism, sexuality and class. These discussions are hardly subtle in the show itself, but at least generate some interesting discussion, particular in the book's third section focusing on characters and identity. Mention should also go to Mikel J. Koven's chapter 'I'm a Fairy? How Fucking Lame!': *True Blood* as Fairytale', which explores the ways in which the series plays out its commentary on prejudice, both sexual and racial, using the allegorical fairy-tale framework and actually makes the fairy aspect of the show almost sound appealing.

U. Melissa Anyiwo's chapter 'It's Not Television, It's Transmedia Storytelling: Marketing the 'Real' World of *True Blood*' alludes to the decentralisation of the television as platform for the text. This develops an area avoided by *TV Horror* and embraces the potential, as well as the limitations, of the television set. The blurring between the cinematic and televisual, as well as the multi-platform delivery and promotion of a show like *True Blood* (and indeed, *The Walking Dead*), show that a transformation has, and *is* taking place. Perhaps this new terrain is where television horror can be at its most potent in delivering the scares, not only getting into our

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homes through a screen in the living room, but into our bedrooms, bathrooms and gardens, as well as our commute to work, via the tablets and smart phones we take with us in our everyday lives.

As strong as this collection on *True Blood* is, one has to wonder how long such a television series will not only remain in the public eye, but also be subject to such sustained academic attention. It doesn't appear to have made such a cultural impact as *Buffy*, and I would argue that the *Twilight* (2008-12) franchise has played a significant role in its current success. No doubt, when *True Blood* is 'finally' laid to rest later this year, we'll see revised editions and follow-up volumes that will either undermine or contradict the current readings available. Of course, while all texts should and are, reappraised and re-evaluated over time, it does seem as if, in an age when academically refereed articles are readily available online, that such books become redundant much sooner than before.

What both books under review here prove, is that interest in television horror is still very much alive and well, even if the subjects of such books are usually dead, decaying or both. While Cherry's *True Blood* will have a limited appeal because of its focus on one show (although with interest in vampires at an all time high, perhaps the term 'limited' is perhaps inappropriate), both books provide interesting insights into the genre that refuses to die.

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