



Vampires strike back: 'True Blood' boils anew in Season 2

By Bill Keveney, USA TODAY

These are sanguine times for vampires.

The *Twilight* novels and movie are huge hits with young women, *The Vampire Diaries* is coming to CW, and the return of HBO's *True Blood* (Sunday, 9 p.m. ET/PT) is eagerly awaited by rabid fans.

Buzz has been building for *Blood*. The show is based on Charlaine Harris' nine-book series about vampires gingerly entering society after the discovery of synthetic blood eliminates the need — if not always the desire — to feed on humans. Season 2 roughly follows Harris' second Sookie Stackhouse novel, *Living Dead in Dallas*.

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PAQUIN AND MOYER: [Among Hollywood couples on and off the set](#)

In tune with the "popcorn for smart people" label that creator Alan Ball once assigned the show, he promises a second season of "just more — sexier, hotter, funnier, scarier, more violent."

"Nakeder," too, says Anna Paquin, who plays Stackhouse.

As the 12-episode second season opens, telepathic Sookie (Paquin) and the vampire Bill (Stephen Moyer) are a happy couple (Paquin and Moyer are in real life, too) in Bon Temps, a rural Louisiana town surrounded by wild nature, where shape-shifters and otherworldly creatures also live.

"Their initial growing-pains moments are over for the time being, but because it's Bill and Sookie and *True Blood*, as soon as things get even vaguely comfortable, something always comes along to disrupt it, be that a vampire teenager or (vampire) Eric or odd creatures," says Paquin, an Oscar winner for *The Piano*.

The Bon Temps serial killings were solved in Season 1, and Season 2 expands quickly to three story lines: Bill and Sookie, with teen vamp Jessica (Deborah Ann Woll) in tow, off to find a missing vampire; Tara (Rutina Wesley) and Sam (Sam Trammell) thrown off kilter by the mysterious Maryann (Michelle Forbes); and Sookie's suggestible brother, Jason (Ryan Kwanten), attending a conference of the anti-vampire Fellowship of the Sun.

"It's like three different shows, but they all eventually converge," Ball says.

And the stories move, Paquin says. "We all know our characters better, and we're not starting from a place of having to introduce them to the audience."

HBO, which has seen Showtime become the talked-about pay-cable network, could use a big hit. *Blood*, HBO's top show, nearly doubled viewership from premiere (1.6 million) to Season 1 finale (2.9 million).

The first-season DVD ranked fourth in sales when it was released last month, and a Web survey by TV.com says *Blood* trails only *Burn Notice* as the summer show that viewers are happiest to see return.

Harris says she loved the first season. She had to adjust to the different physical appearances of some of the characters, such as Paquin's Sookie, but she praises Ball for excellent casting.

Readers have plenty to say about the series, Harris says. "A certain percentage believe the show is pornographic. A huger percentage love it and are very anxious for their favorite scenes from the books to be re-created in the show."

And sales of the Sookie novels have skyrocketed since *Blood's* premiere, with more than 8 million in print. The most recent, *Dead and Gone*, published in May, made its debut at No. 2 on USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list.

Ageless attraction

Vampires, rarely out of vogue, are enjoying a resurgence. Besides *Blood*, *Twilight* and *Vampire Diaries*, there are more films (Sweden's *Let the Right One In*), more books (MaryJanice Davidson's *Undead* series) and even a vampire convention (Vampire-Con, Aug. 14-16, Los Angeles).

If anything, "I was nervous the culture might be at a saturation point," HBO entertainment chief Sue Naegle says.

That vampire wave could keep *Blood* from becoming the kind of pop phenomenon *The Sopranos* was, says David Scardino, entertainment specialist at ad agency RPA. "*True Blood* has been a winner for them. It has gotten them back some buzz," he says. "But people probably perceive it as being in a group of projects about vampires, and *The Sopranos* was such a unique twist."

Why all the passion for vampires? They're "a powerful metaphor for sexuality," says Ball, also an Oscar winner (for writing *American Beauty*). "They're immortal. They have powers. They don't live by the same rules most of us have to live by. They're kind of the ultimate sexy rock star/bad boy/ bad girl."

Harris says the fantasy world of vampires — which in *True Blood* also pays homage to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Greek tragedy — offers "a vacation from reality," which can be welcome in difficult times. And these bloodsuckers are a lot more attractive than the Nosferatus of the past.

"The idea of beings who are always at peak condition, never age, never have to get their teeth capped, never have to get their knees replaced, never have to die — or diet — and yet they're always looking great, that probably has a lot to do with" their appeal, Harris says.

Moyer, whose Bill is 173 years old, says ageless vampires connect viewers to an earlier, more genteel era. "Vampires come from a very Gothic place, (and) there is a courtly manner they tend to have. I think that's attractive."

The mix of humor, horror, mystery and romance broadens the appeal, says Moyer, who needs heavy makeup to white out evidence of being in the sun. "I have 70-year-old men come up to me with their wives, and the men are the fans. Then you've got the housewife thing going on. And I'll be in the gym and two 28-year-old dudes will come up and go, 'Wow! We love your show!' It's really struck a nerve."

Ball credits his cast — both those playing vampires and those playing humans — for much of *Blood's* popularity. "Anna sells someone who has been hearing other people's thoughts her entire life and how that sort of stuff makes one neurotic. She sells the strength of Sookie and her determination. What Stephen sells to me is this guy from another time who is uncomfortable being a vampire."

Into the light of day

The series appeals to John Folden, who runs the true-blood .tv fan website, partly because it doesn't overemphasize the vampires' differences. "Its vampire characters don't hate who they are, they're living openly among society," Folden says. "The show doesn't really turn them into heroes or demonize them. They're just like everyone else, and some of the most horrific events are actually acted out by the mortal characters."

Elizabeth Henderson, co-owner of true-blood.net, got hooked on Harris' books, which are told from Sookie's perspective, largely for the humor, especially the notion of vampires "coming out of the coffin" and into the real world.

"What I like about the show is how Alan Ball has taken us out of Sookie's head and put the focus on characters we didn't know as well in the books," she says.

Henderson and true-blood .net co-owner Melissa Lowery had to move their website to a dedicated server as visits increased by 50% in the last month, and daily traffic doubled this week alone. Lori Riggs, owner of *Blood* fan site fangbangers.com, says that her visitors tripled this spring to 6,000 a month.

Blood's premiere episodes averaged 2.3 million viewers, a solid if not particularly high number. But they more than tripled in total audience (7.8 million) counting on-demand and DVR viewing, HBO's best series showing since the final seasons of *The Sopranos* (about 13 million) and *Sex and the City* (about 10 million).

But *Blood's* buzz — crucial for a subscription-based network — falls short of those hits, says John Rash of Minneapolis advertising agency Campbell Mithun. "It hasn't cut through the cultural clutter to the degree their biggest hits have, but it's certainly one of many shows that have worked for the network. It's rare for any show, let alone one on pay cable, to seize the news."

Naegle says she's thrilled with *Blood's* ratings and sees strong iTunes and DVD sales as a sign of interest going into the season. "We're bullish and excited about a big opening."

So is Ball, who didn't have a strong interest in vampires before reading the Sookie novels and starting *Blood*. "As much as I've enjoyed all the work I've done, this is the most fun. I'm sure it has a lot to do with the supernatural, fantastic nature of the show," he says. "I guess you could say I've embraced vampires."

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