

TELEVISION REVIEWS

Witchcraft 101:

The Secret Circle

(CW/ Sky Living, Sept 2011 – May 2012)

Vampires, it goes without saying, are “In”. So are zombies. We have, in fact, seen so many of these undead consumers of human flesh and blood in recent years, on both the small and big screens, that a certain degree of fatigue is setting in. Recent efforts to broaden the range of monsters on TV are therefore to be lauded. On this side of the Atlantic, Sky Living has done some sterling work in this regard, struggling to relieve the gloom of this rain-rotted, recession-ridden little isle with a rather more glitzy kind of darkness, in the shape first of glossy teenage werewolves (in *Teen Wolf*) and now, in a new 22-episode adaptation of L.J. Smith’s *The Secret Circle* novels, glossy teenage witches.

Like many an oppressed minority, witches have had a less than easy time of it over the years. After centuries of persecution and culturally sanctioned mass-murder, as Bernice Murphy explains at length in her book *Suburban Gothic*, they have largely been relegated to narratively and socially subordinate positions in fiction, theatre and film. Domesticated to ditsy housewife status in shows like *Bewitched* and *Charmed*, or to second-fiddle roles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood* and indeed *Macbeth*, witches fare even worse in those texts which seek to exonerate them and counter long-standing prejudice. Some of the finest depictions of witch-related panics, including Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Michael Reeve’s *Witchfinder General* and even, arguably, *The Blair Witch Project*, succeed in convincing us that witches have been wrongfully demonised only by insisting that there is no such thing, and that those accused of witchcraft are simply misunderstood old women (Diana Wynne Jones’ *Witch Week* being a notable and much-neglected exception). Works such as Fritz Leiber’s *Conjure Wife*, Eva Ibbotson’s *Which Witch?*, George A. Romero’s *Season of the Witch* (aka *Jack’s Wife*) and, potentially, Shirley Jackson’s unfinished novel *Come Along with Me*, go some way towards redressing the balance. Focusing as they do on strongly individualised, powerful, dangerous yet sympathetic women, they suggest, to varying degrees, that an engagement with witchcraft makes possible a greater degree of personal and social agency.

All too often, however, the narrative lure of the coven motif reduces the individualism and sense of control that dabbling in magic can confer upon a fictional female character. Classics such as Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, Dario Argento’s *Suspiria* and George Miller’s *The Witches of Eastwick*, along with more recent offerings, frothier films like Griffin Dunne’s *Practical Magic* and Andrew Fleming’s *The Craft*, emphasise the collective nature of women’s magic, and bonds of loyalty and singleness of purpose that render it perilous, even impossible, for a member to go her own way. Indeed, the latter three make very clear that independence on the part of any one of the coven is a sure sign of her failure to subordinate her own desires to the needs of the group, a crime for which she is invariably punished severely. To be a good witch, therefore, whether one practices dark or light magic, is to be little more than a cog in a larger machine, the unity of which must be preserved, at whatever cost to the individuals who comprise the whole.

This, at any rate, is the burden of the plot of Kevin Williamson’s televisionisation of *The Secret Circle*, which focuses on Cassie Blake (Britt Robertson), who, after moving to the fictional town of Chance Harbour,

Washington, discovers that she is the final member of a mixed-gender coven. It transpires that the group's magic has been passed down to them by their parents, who formed an identical coven many years before, but who had died in a mysterious fire, Cassie's efforts to discover the exact cause of which consumes most of the present action of the series. Both endangered and protected by the power they wield as a group, predictably, any efforts on the parts of the teenagers to break from the group leaves the others (and possibly the entire world) in peril. The result of this set up is, somewhat lamentably, an often turgid, always labyrinthine sequence of events, revolving around uncertain paternity, familial and romantic betrayal, divided loyalties and ancient organisations of witches, witch hunters and other magically inclined groupings. The shifting allegiances and alliances between these groups is bewildering enough, but it is frequently even more difficult to figure out why they should all be so hell bent on getting hold of the diminutive, blond Cassie. It seems unprofessionally naïve on the parts of those who wish either to break or exploit the power of the coven that they largely ignoring her far more interesting brunette co-covenites (the central two boys – Adam (Thomas Dekker) and Jake (Chris Zylka) are, somewhat predictably, reduced to little more than obedient but unconvincingly enigmatic sex objects).

Such, however, is the logic of a teen drama, and who are we to argue. Cassie, with her tumbling golden curls, doll-like physique and morally ambiguous powers, which, apparently, far outstrip those of her friends (though this isn't always entirely evident from the action itself) is evidently intended to call to mind Sarah Michelle Gellar's turn as Buffy – and indeed, Sky's pairing of *The Secret Circle* with the Gellar vehicle *Ringer* tries valiantly to reinforce this superficial association. Vitally, however, *The Secret Circle* rather lacks the charm and, even less forgivably, the humour of Joss Whedon's cult series, possibly because the attempt to adapt a series of novels has been overly ambitious. By trying to squeeze everything in, the show's creators have ended up with an unwieldy number of characters and hurried plot expositions that overshadow the potentially interesting story of a young girl seeking to come to terms with her own unfamiliar powers. Stand-alone or novelty episodes are effectively absent (though, to be fair, these have been increasingly weeded out of almost every American television programme in recent years, a trend that is to be lamented at every available opportunity), rendering the tangle of plot strands and group dynamics at once claustrophobic and less than easy to navigate.

In its defence, though, *The Secret Circle* does look very pretty, with a pleasingly tenebrous *mise-en-scène* and a few impressive set pieces among all the sparsely lit small-town kitsch, including a creepy abandoned ship and the obligatory drug/ magic-dealer's den. The latter is invested with just enough of an edge of voodoo to keep it on the grittier side of iconography of commercial supernatural establishments familiar from many of the films and programmes mentioned above. Most of the actual magic performed by the characters, however, tends to be of an Apollonian rather than a Dionysian nature, generally eschewing the messing around with bits of animals ground up in borrowed pestle-and-mortar sets in favour of Potterish arm waving, crystals, family heirlooms and shabby Books of Shadows, making this for the most part a cerebral rather than a bodily kind of enchantment. And of course, the sub-plot of addiction to artificial magical stimulants – another nod to *Buffy*, where Willow's dabbling takes an increasingly serious turn – is confined mainly to Faye (Phoebe Tomkin), the raven-haired, statuesque and, it is hinted, sexually forward rebel of the group, who chaffs under the constraints imposed by membership of the coven. Cassie may be consumed more and more by her inherited dark magic as the series progresses, but for her, being possessed by the supernatural is an innate part of her genetic destiny, rather than something she purchases from an unscrupulous and financially motivated external source.

In other words, *The Secret Circle* is fairly standard magical fare, with the occasional flash of arresting visuals from out of the slick production values, and a few moments of genuine tension and jumpiness, but without the courage to explore the murkier depths of witchcraft in any real detail. Indeed, while it has

much in common with Stewart Hendler's recent remake of the film *Sorority Row* and the Warner Brother's series *Pretty Little Liars*, brought to Ireland and Britain by MTV, these actually offer more closely observed dissections of disintegrating female friendship under the pressure of dangerous situations that undermine the privilege upon which the groups are built.

That said, the news that the CW Network cancelled the show after the first season is still unwelcome. The wearying predictability of such cancellations do little to reduce the sense that it is difficult, even in a decade that seems to have embraced the troubling juxtaposition of monstrosity and identity politics as this one has, to create a television show based on supernatural horror. The first season of many programmes can frequently be a little weak (*Buffy* being a prime example here), as the actors and producers find their feet and as audiences learn to feel greater affection for the characters and concern for what might happen to them. It is only in later seasons that relationships and conceptual arcs mature to the point of engaging our interest and of functioning as genuine social or cultural commentary, and decisions to cut shows off before this has become possible dooms them to being remembered as mediocre performances – if indeed they are remembered at all. *The Secret Circle* is in no way a genre-defining production, nor is it even especially compulsive viewing. It may, however, have had the potential (albeit slight) to revitalise the image of the witch in popular culture, until it was stopped in its tracks. Since we'll never know, it seems fair to assume that we will continue, therefore, where horror television is concerned, to go around and around in decreasingly memorable circles.

PAT WOLFE

Not Fade Away:
The Fades
 (BBC3, Sept – Oct 2011)

The job of a reviewer of televisual horror can be a dispiriting one. With the notable exception of the current rash of moodily attractive vampires, horror themes and characters play a distinctly minor role in the schedules, and those rare shows which do succeed in conjuring up effective scares or properly Gothic atmospherics are permitted only the briefest of lifespans on the small screen. In a world where the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises have clocked seven and three films respectively, and where remakes of 'seventies and 'eighties horror films such as *Halloween* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* rival in number the multiple sequels to the original films themselves, TV horror is being increasingly side-lined. Some of the most imaginative and promising series of recent times, from Joss Whedon's *Angel* to Michele Fazekas and Tara Butters' *Reaper* have been cut off in their prime, the victims of top-down decision making that privileges short-term ratings over long-term fan commitment and box-set sales.

It is not therefore surprising, merely depressing and frustrating, that Jack Thorne's *The Fades* (a six-part BBC3 series about resentful, malevolent ghosts and the very ordinary humans who can see them and try to stop them from taking over the world) should have been awarded a BAFTA for Best Drama Series, just a month after the announcement that it would not be returning for a second season. *The Fades* is quite frankly an astonishing achievement, a rare combination of stunning (and often disgusting) visuals, passionate and believable acting, and not merely flashes but a veritable lightning storm of original ideas and narrative risks. Drawing upon but also evolving the genre's often hackneyed obsession with death – with our fear of dying, but also of what might happen to others after their biological lives have ceased – *The Fades* works hard to unsettle any comfortable beliefs we might have about the finality of mortality, and about distinctions between the “normal” and the monstrous. Nor is this simply a matter of “blurring boundaries” – a favourite activity of literary critics everywhere these days. Over a very small number of episodes, the show dumps its protagonists into seriously treacherous moral and ethical territory, where they still have to negotiate the mundane, dull and often ridiculous details of daily life.

In terms of the plot, which is by no means easy to summarise, *The Fades* follows Paul (Iain de Caestecker), a shy, slightly disaffected young man, whose waking hours begin to be disturbed by his horrific dreams about the end of the world, alienating him from his mother and twin sister. To make matters worse, he then starts to see ghosts – the eponymous “Fades” who, he learns, are spirits of the dead who have been refused entry to Heaven, and instead wander the land of living, unperceived by all but a few gifted individuals. One of these individuals (known as “Angelics,” and who are depicted as a sort of underground rebel movement, operating just below the surface and on the margins of everyday English society) is Neil Valentine (Johnny Harris). Neil, who has lost a friend and an eye to the Fades' depredations, is a growling, bearded cyclops of a man, who effectively stalks Paul, jumping out at him from behind his bedroom door in an effort to educate him about the world his new-found senses reveal to him, while simultaneously frightening the living daylight out of him – and, frequently, us.

Not that the creatures that Neil and his fellow vigilante Angelics fight are any less scary – far from it. Before long, we learn that the Fades have discovered how to regain corporeal form – by eating flesh, of course – and the result is a repulsively slimy, pulsating re-birthing scene in a grimy bathtub that lingers hideously in the mind's eye long after the series itself is over. When this association with abjection is combined with the brutality with which resurrected Fades treat Paul and his friends in later episodes, it

initially seems easy to relegate them to the realm of Irredeemably Evil Demonic Types, and hence to cheer when Our Heroes vanquish them bravely. The problem is, however, that we all die – and in the violent but also meaninglessly chaotic world depicted by the programme, death is never far away, in the mundane form of a speeding car or the looming spectre of suicide as much as in the cold-eyed shape of a recorporealised ghost. To go into too much more detail as to what happens would be to destroy the startling effect of coming to *The Fades* as a first-time viewer. Suffice it to say, however, that the easy assignation of victim or perpetrator status to any individual or group is not just something that the programme strives to undermine, but is part of the explicit subject matter, as the local police force (led by the father of Paul's best friend Mac (Daniel Kaluuya)) struggle to find someone to arrest in the wake of multiple disappearances and violent attacks.

With a broad but not unwieldy range of characters, in which the town's various social strata are amply represented, there is clearly more than enough material here to have continued at least into a second series – as series producer Caroline Skinner insisted on accepting the BAFTA for the show. Indeed, while the troubled Paul (who, it transpires, is a sort of Messiah figure, psychically powerful enough to withstand and even destroy the Fades) is both the focus of the action and a sympathetic, believable adolescent, the supporting cast more than hold their own. In particular, Mac is played by Kaluuya as a sort of witty, genre-savvy Samwise Gamgee, grounding Paul's flights of visionary fancy and providing an ironic commentary on his friend's often dangerously distracting romantic liaison with his sister Anna's (Lily Loveless) quirky friend Jay (Sophie Wu). Indeed, Anna's transition from impatient bimbo to angry heroine via an extended panic attack is a pleasure to watch, and a development rather than a mere repetition of the conventional Final Girl role.

As I've already mentioned, it would do the viewing experience itself a disservice to expand on what actually happens in *The Fades*, and any attempt at plot summary would result in reducing the action to a series of trite-sounding set pieces. To watch it in its entirety is to encounter not merely a thought-provoking but an entertaining and often very funny piece of television, one that builds upon the precedent of tragi-comic supernatural drama established by BBC's *Being Human*, one of the few success stories of recent small-screen horror. While *Being Human* generally minimises the scares in favour of a kind of demonic comedy of manners, however, *The Fades* reverses the proportions and succeeds, in doing so, in leaving the viewer with an increasingly shaky sense of the stability and transparency of the world we take for granted. Steeped in the iconography of twenty-first century ecological disaster and impending economic collapse, Paul's visions of an England where the Fades have won is at once eerily spectral and uncomfortably imaginable. And as for a world in which *The Fades* itself has won the BAFTAs but lost the battle against corporate greed – perhaps the less said the better.

DARA DOWNEY

Desperate Housewives: Witches Lament
(ABC, 2011)

For some, Halloween is an excuse to watch visceral horror films, to wound pumpkins and don the latest terrifying garb. For others, the 31st October is but a Pagan prelude to the praying, fasting, vigils and religious services of All Saints' Day (November 1st). It's a little like Christmas in that we are treated to a variety of holiday specific offerings from television.

The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet: Halloween Party (1952) arguably birthed the first Halloween "special episode" on American television. Hundreds of fright fests followed suit. *South Park: Hell on Earth* (2006) is a recent offering that featured Satan hosting his very own sweet-sixteen birthday party in LA: his guest list included notorious serial killers such as, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy.

ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present) has also broadcast three Halloween-inspired episodes. Each episode is numbered sixth in the season and the title of each is taken from the song "I Know Things Now" from Stephen Sondheim's sinister musical *Into the Woods* (1986). "Witches Lament" (2011, Dir: Tony Plana) was the latest spooky special that traded in its habitually kooky costume spectacles for a more chilling instalment in which the women are haunted by the sins of the not so distant past.

So what does the cultural phenomenon that is *Desperate Housewives* have to do with the horror genre? Well, to begin with, it is worth noting that many of the cast and crew have laboured on their fair share of horror films, perhaps the most memorable being the cold-blooded campness of Roger Bart (who plays evil pharmacist George Williams) in Eli Roth's *Hostel Part II* (2007). Gothic-fantastic composer Danny Elfman even scores the show. What's more, the show's fictional street, Wisteria Lane (Fairview), shares the same studio setting as horror hits such as Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), television series *The Munsters* (1964-66), Dante's *The 'Burbs* (1989) and more recently *Zombie's House of 1000 Corpses* (2000).

It's certainly not all freshly baked muffins, gingham aprons and frozen smiles on Wisteria Lane. Throughout the eight seasons audiences have witnessed a hit and run, wrist slitting, stabbing, gunshots to the head, choking, live burial, poisoning, axe beating, overdose and assisted euthanasia. Deaths have also included: being impaled on a fence post, blown away by a tornado, crushed by a wardrobe, car accidents, electrocutions, being hit by a falling plane, murder by candlestick bludgeoning and death by viral infection. Not to mention asphyxiation at the hands of the Fairview Strangler!

Granted, while the show may have shaky horror credentials, - it's certainly not a "pure" horror show in the way that shows like *American Gothic*, or, more recently, *The River* are - it does without a doubt, lie squarely within the Suburban Gothic sub-genre. This is particularly evident in the first three seasons, which features typically ripe suburban anxieties such as, a family's involvement in a dubious suicide, a deadly love triangle and a supermarket hostage situation between husband and wife, are the focus of the community. The genius of *Desperate Housewives* lies in its fluid blending of genres. One can be transported through melodrama, thriller, soap opera and visceral horror within a matter of minutes. For instance, in one of the very first scenes of the series we witness the bloodied body of housewife Mary Alice, who has just committed suicide. This visual is immediately followed by an extreme close up of the local scandalmonger licking tomato ketchup from her fingers. Mary Alice narrates the show from beyond

the grave, observing her former neighbours' daily struggle with the horrors of domesticity. Disgust, jealousy, desire, revenge and discontentment seethe throughout Wisteria Lane.

As Halloween looms in "Witches Lament", the housewives have discovered that Ben's (Charles Measure) real estate construction is about to commence on the spot that Gabrielle's (Eva Longoria) rapist stepfather Alejandro (episode director Tony Plana) is illicitly buried. Bree (Marcia Cross), Lynette (Felicity Huffman) and Gabrielle must attempt to resurrect and redispense of the body. Rather than focus upon the typical plot-driven 'who done it' scenario, the slow-simmering chiller focuses on the cold-sweat anxieties that accompany the fear and paranoia of being caught. Cover-ups are a recurring theme on the show and a common trope of the Suburban Gothic sub-genre.

The episode opens with a scene that functions entirely unconventionally for *Desperate Housewives* as we witness the lower halves of the shovel-clad, torch-flailing housewives running through the forest to the sound of laboured breathing. Here Plana sets the scene by indicating to the audience that the episode will employ well-known horror genre tropes throughout. The scene in particular evokes the slasher film, as we are forced to witness the short-breathed panic of the victims as they flee their pursuing captor whilst stumbling through the claustrophobic and challenging terrain of the forest. The backwoods scene is intercut with speed-ramped point of view shots rampaging through the wonderfully gothic, fog-drenched forest. Elfman's score intensifies the visuals. The scene is highly reminiscent of one in Marcus Nispel's *Friday The 13th remake* (2009) in which a couple of torch-carrying victims run through the woods of Camp Crystal Lake in an attempt to escape the hockey mask wearing serial killer, Jason Voorhees. The panic-stricken housewives are suddenly rendered motionless what they have uncovered off-screen. The scene leaves the audience on a cliffhanger until the closing of the episode, when all is revealed.

Further into the episode, religious ex-con Carlos Solis (Ricardo Antonio Chavira) struggles with alcoholism triggered by the overwhelming guilt of killing Alejandro, who had been tormenting his wife Gabrielle. He finds the murder hardest to deal with of everyone involved, which is to be expected, given that he is the killer. Whilst home alone, Carlos opens his door to what he believes to be an innocent trick or treater and is instantly terrified by a smirking Alejandro. While Carlos stands dumbfounded, the visual of Alejandro reverts into a candy-hunting kid dressed as the living dead, thus reaffirming to the viewer Carlos' guilt-ridden conscience.

As a result of this terrifying encounter, Carlos begins to hit the bottle again. This visual of the Freddy Kruger-esque Alejandro that results, evoking Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's table, is one of the most eerie images in the entire series. Elfman's unsettling orchestral score enhances and reiterates the fright. Mexican born alpha-male Carlos came from a violent home and after becoming a successful businessman married his high-maintenance wife, Gabrielle. Crooked business deals and the relentless demands of his trophy wife usually land Carlos in hot water with the law and constantly conflict with his newfound, prison-gained, Catholic beliefs. The scene featuring the 'hallucination' of Alejandro is undoubtedly frightening and also provides subtext regarding the horrors of domesticity. Gabrielle's own humiliation and dread, caused by the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather Alejandro, as a child, has however had a transformative effect on her husband. As Mary Alice states in the narration of a previous episode, "monsters create other monsters." Carlos's primitive attempt to transform shame into pride leads himself and those he holds dear to further anxiety, paranoia and fear. His impossible situation arguably evokes two well-known psychological horror flicks, Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) and Ruben's *The Stepfather* (1987).

Later in the episode, after an unexpected romantic rejection, narcissistic diva Renee (Vanessa Williams), decides to turn up the heat for her first liaison with mysterious new neighbour Ben by swigging a bottle of so-called 'love potion'. The self-induced 'roofy' causes horrendous side effects. In a darkly humorous scene Ben is passionately kissing Renee when suddenly she starts to gag fiercely as her throat becomes tight with the reaction. Her eyes soon gloss over and her face festers into boils and sores.

The gruesome features are not unlike Regan's (Linda Blair) once she has been possessed by the demon in Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). She subsequently faints and Ben has no option but to drag her prone body to his car, much to the horror of the young trick or treaters. The children flee frantically from the grotesque housewife as she shambles nauseously in the driveway. Once again the episode captures perfectly the horrors of domesticity as Renee takes extreme measures in a desperate attempt to save face in the throes of her sexual paranoia.

Finally, we enter the closing of the episode by returning to the sinister woodland from the opening scene. In usual hard-boiled fashion, the housewives agree to dig up the body before the real estate excavation. Thick-skinned champion homemaker Bree taxis Lynette and Gabrielle to the scene. She unsympathetically chirps to her concerned friends, "I have all the supplies in my trunk, along with clean towels, hand sanitizer and breathing masks, in case the stench is overwhelming. A Beacon of conservative values and avid collector of firearms, Bree Van de Kamp, the community's most confidante, boasts an impressive track record of covering up crimes. Indeed, Bree's cover-ups are usually of the murderous kind, such as, her part in hiding her son Andrew's involvement in a fatal hit-and-run, her own role in the suicide of a psychotic ex-lover and her provision of a fake alibi for her bitter rival's deadly crime of passion.

The women enter the forest debating over the likely state of the rapidly rotting corpse. The friends frantically split on hearing a male voice bark, "Hey! Who's there?" A plot twist is employed when the housewives are shocked to discover Alejandro's empty grave, which is implicative of similar themes exploited in Dante's *The 'Burbs* (1989), when Ray (Tom Hanks), suspicious of strange noises coming from the house of his eccentric neighbours, climbs into their garden while they are away to search for dead bodies. His day light dig bears no fruit and results in him gazing with disbelief into a number of empty grave-shaped holes in the garden. Bree, Gabrielle and Lynette protect each other and each other's families to endless lengths, suffering the dire complexities of guilt and the exasperating fear of being caught in the name of love, friendship, faithfulness and reputation. As Mary Alice narrates in a previous episode, "the thing that binds friends together the most is a secret that changes everything."

Instead of being merely another cheesy Halloween effort, "Witches Lament" delivers stellar performances from the cast and creates an outstanding atmosphere, injecting a dose of scream-queen horror into 'chick-flick' comedy-drama. The show's pleasing glimpses of suburban horror give it every right to accompany Dante's *The 'Burbs* (1989) and Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) on any film fan's shelf.

VICTORIA McCOLLUM

Fear Itself
(NBC, 2008)

Running for thirteen episodes, only eight of which were originally aired on the series' initial U.S. broadcast, *Fear Itself* (2008-2009) stands as an interesting if flawed example of the anthology show format. Though ostensibly it does not rely on the participation of established 'names' to the extent that both seasons of *Masters of Horror* (2005-2009) did, *Fear Itself*, the third anthology series from show runner Mick Garris, nevertheless brings together an eclectic bunch of genre talent including Ronny Yu, Steve Niles, William B. Davis and Eric Roberts, though with only limited success.

It is difficult not to see Garris' move from cable to network TV (NBC) for *Fear Itself* as at least partially to blame for the show's numerous failings. While *Masters of Horror*'s positioning on Showtime can be read as a (frequently) successful marriage between the show's often extreme content and the desired demographic of the cable channel, in comparison, *Fear Itself* flounders with a shorter running time of forty five minutes (more amenable to commercial breaks but not the building of effective shocks) and a reduced opportunity to depict the graphic imagery that some would argue are crucial to the horror genre. Perhaps *Fear Itself*'s biggest problem is that it suffers from a noticeable lack of budget, the result being that the expensive special effects showcases of *Masters of Horror* (such as series two's 'Pelts') are noticeably absent while the scope of the storytelling in *Fear Itself* has had to be scaled back from the more ambitious and longer narratives of the *Masters of Horror* (see "The Screwfly Solution"). Consequently we get episodes with characters constrained to an old fort ("The Sacrifice"), a haunted house ("Spooked") and a wedding reception ("In Sickness and In Health") to name just a few of the closed locales on offer. Indeed, much like the often uneven quality of its spiritual predecessor, individual episodes of *Fear Itself* vary somewhat in quality though the most successful manage to use the apparent limits imposed by the relative financial constraints of the show to their advantage crafting effective horror vignettes that utilise the 'scaled down' nature of their narratives to evoke a sense of claustrophobic suspense. Such is the case with episode eight, "Skin and Bones" which manages to present an interesting take on the Wendigo story with genre stalwart Doug Jones (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Hellboy*) playing a possessed man who returns to his family home in mysterious circumstances. Jones' character starts surreptitiously killing his family and it quickly transpires that he has in fact been eating those around him, including his brother who has designs on his wife and is the father of his two children. The episode, which has tonal echoes of the much underrated *Ravenous* (1999), culminates in a standoff in which Jones' wife offs her husband and saves their kids. While "Skin and Bones" does little that is truly original it does at least manage to create an entertaining forty five minutes of television.

Similarly, Stuart Gordon (*Re-Animator*, *Castle Freak*), directs the effective fifth episode entitled "Eater" another darkly comedic story of cannibalism, that manages to make the most of its confined prison setting. Helped by the acting of Elisabeth Moss playing a young police officer called 'Boot' Bannerman (Moss being more well known to contemporary audiences as Peggy Olson in *Mad Men*) the episode tells the story of a Cajun serial killer or 'eater' who escapes his incarceration and proceeds to consume those he encounters. Gordon creates a clammy sense of dread exacerbated when Bannerman realises that Miller has escaped and is able to assume the appearance of those he proceeds to kill. Ending with a somewhat hokey yet nevertheless entertaining twist, "Eater" (like *Skin and Bones*) demonstrates that the format of *Fear Itself* need not be a hindrance when those involved recognise the limitations imposed upon them.

Yet, while the majority of episodes have something to redeem them (such as Marshall Bell's suitably weird turn as Uncle Bob in "In Sickness and in Health"), by the time we get to the later part of the season

the repeated reliance on siege like scenarios requiring only small casts and very little on location shooting really begins to grate as the 'bottle' show structure is repeated. Episode thirteen "The Circle" in particular, shows a dearth of ideas; the episode's loosely defined plot seemingly borrowing from a host of sources including, most noticeably, Remedy Entertainment's 2010 video game *Alan Wake* (itself indebted to *Twin Peaks*, the novels of Stephen King and Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness*) in its tale of a Horror writer who is beset by his own creations in an isolated log cabin in the woods. "The Circle's somewhat po-faced approach to what might have been a rather interesting self-reflexive take on the subject of authorial inspiration exemplifies another problem with the series as a whole, which is that it frequently seems at pains to take itself (overly) seriously. Indeed, while such a straight laced tone is perfectly valid, the anthology format would seem to lend itself to an at least partially comedic approach with several of the more successful examples of the form such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996) showing some (albeit wry) awareness of their own ridiculousness. In fact, while many critics have suggested that *Masters of Horror* failed to live up to the potential of those involved behind the scenes, the show often tended to work best when it's directors recognised the usefulness of comedy in encouraging an audience to forgive an episode's other (often budgetary related) shortcomings (evident in Stuart Gordon's "The Black Cat" for example).

Despite this tradition, *Fear Itself's* individual stories frequently lack an overtly comedic touch with even those episodes directed by figures usually associated with a humorous approach to the genre seemingly reigning in this aspect of their work. For example, while episode eight, "New Years Day" is scripted by Steve Niles (most well known for writing the comic book *30 Days of Night*) and directed by Darren Lynn Bousman (director of *Saw II* and *Repo! The Genetic Opera* among others) Bousman's execution seems to be at pains to avoid the suggestion of anything comedic in a zombified landlady or competing zombie suitors for the love of the central character, Helen, though there is something grotesquely humorous about the episode's use of "Happily Ever After" as Helen's love interests approach to tear her limb from limb.

In conclusion, *Fear Itself* proves too inconsistent to join the ranks of the most critically revered anthology series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959 – 1964), existing instead in the wasteland of shows that failed to succeed with what is a notoriously difficult format (see also the recent *Stephen King's Nightmares and Dreamscapes*). Too many of its episodes are hamstrung by a noticeable lack of budget and ambition on the part of those involved, meaning that the viewer is faced with a series that all too quickly begins recycling its own formula. Such a failure does not perhaps bode well for the long gestating *Masters of Italian Horror*.

DAVID SIMMONS