

***Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Monster Book***

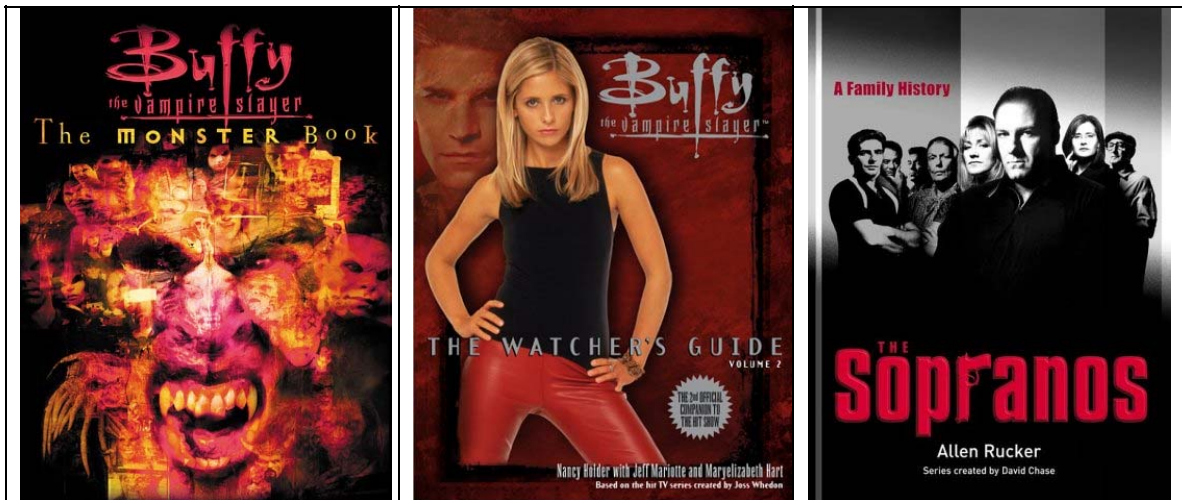
Christopher Golden, Stephen R. Bissette, and Thomas E. Sniegoski  
New York: Pocket Books

***Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Watcher's Guide. Vol. 2***

Nancy Holder, with Jeff Mariotte and Maryelizabeth Hart  
Pocket Books

***The Sopranos: A Family History***

Allen Rucker  
New American Library



**David Lavery**

Over a decade ago, John Fiske reminded us (in *Television Culture*) that TV series are “activated texts,” generating much more than the individual episodes that constitute a series’ actual on-air presence. Both secondary (criticism, publicity) and tertiary (discussion and commentary occurring at the fan level) texts follow in the wake of most TV shows, and the meaning and significance both kinds of texts generate are plowed back into the primary texts themselves, becoming part of how viewers “read” them. That *Entertainment Weekly* guide to *Seinfeld* deepened our appreciation of a show about nothing. That fanfiction we discovered on the internet, the one that imagines Kirk and Spock as lovers, lead us to see *Star Trek* in a radical new light. That book of “fantasy blueprints of classic TV homes” (Mark Bennett’s *Television Sets*) enhanced our grasp of the “textual geography” of The Clampett mansion or Gilligan’s island.

Contemporary television has likewise spun-off a wide variety of “commodity intertexts” (James Collins’ coinage), secondary texts, both official and unofficial, fiction and non-fiction, to satisfy the often cultic needs of television fans to know more—much more—and imagine more about their favorite programs. A decade ago, *Twin Peaks* produced not only *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* but *The Autobiography of F.B.I. Special Agent Dale Cooper: My Life, My Tapes*, and *Welcome to Twin Peaks: Access Guide to the Town*—all official *Twin Peaks* books. Over the last

decade *The X-Files* industry has generated annual official guides to Chris Carter's series, now in its 8<sup>th</sup> season. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has inspired over a dozen popular paperbacks for those viewers, mostly teens, who can't get enough of Sunnydale and its heroes and villains.

Two of current television's best shows, Joss Whedon's *Buffy*, now in its fifth season on the WB netlet, and David Chase's *The Sopranos*, about to begin its third on HBO—both genuine cultural phenomena, part of what we talk about even for those who do not watch—have also recently produced official companions: for *Buffy*, a comprehensive examination of the series' many monsters and a second "watcher's guide" covering seasons three and four (an earlier volume, written by Golden and Holder, had appeared in 1998) and for *The Sopranos*, a family history.

**From the beginning**, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (hereafter *BtVS*), a series which this season will produce its 100<sup>th</sup> episode, has been one of the most underrated on all of television (this year's Viewers for Quality Television Founder's Award a recent exception). Indeed, as Richard Campbell acknowledges elsewhere in this issue, announcing unashamedly that one simply watches *BtVS* elicits "blank and open-mouthed stares" in some circles—especially among academics. And yet it has always been the most bookish show on television, one in which books and research have figured prominently. *BtVS*' primal scene, at least for the first three years, is Buffy and the Scooby Gang—her friends Xander Harris and Willow Rosenberg and her Watcher, librarian Rupert Giles—gathering in the Sunnydale High School library, researching the monster they are about to fight, acquiring the knowledge which is their power. Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), according to reports, has done for librarians what Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) did for archaeologists. It seems only fitting then that *BtVS*'s arcana should find its way into book form.

*BtVS* is a series with a complex and ever-evolving mythology, explained in germ by Giles in the second part of its pilot episode:

This world is older than any of you know. Contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons demons walked the Earth. They made it their home, their . . . their Hell. But in time they lost their purchase on this reality. The way was made for mortal animals, for, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures...

The books tell the last demon to leave this reality fed off a human, mixed their blood. He was a human form possessed, infected by the demon's soul. He bit another, and another, and so they walk the Earth, feeding . . . killing some, mixing their blood with others to make more of their kind. Waiting for the animals to die out, and the old ones to return.

*BtVS* does not limit itself to these demons, of course. As Giles likewise explains:

Now, I believe this whole area is a center of mystical energy, that things gravitate towards it that, that, that you might not find elsewhere. . . . Like zombies, werewolves, incubi, succubi, . . . everything you've ever dreaded was under your bed, but told yourself couldn't be by the light of day. They're all real!

The first *Watcher's Guide* had offered a brief "Monster Guide," but the monsters have continued non-stop for the last two years and earned their own separate volume.

Divided into sections on Demons, Vampires, Magic Users, Primals, Ghosts, The Walking Dead, Bogeyman, Invisible People, Faith [a fellow slayer who succumbs to the Dark Side] and the Human Monster, *The Monster Book* not only offers encyclopedia-style entries on each specific monster the series has disgorged, including basic information (key relationships, unique attributes, most monstrous moments, current status), relevant quotations, and, of course, a black and white photo, but includes as well comprehensive essays on the background mythology, both inside and outside *BtVS*, of each type. The insightful essay on vampires, for example, is thirteen pages in length.

The second volume of *The Watcher's Guide* presents an all-inclusive guide to what *BtVS*'s creators and fans now call the "Buffyverse." We are given comprehensive character and episode guides, cast profiles, a listing of all the (largely unknown) bands whose music has been featured on *Buffy*, and a largely self-serving guide to *BtVS* merchandise. The *Guide* is at its best tracking continuity (as it does in each entry of the episode guide), for *BtVS* is a show with an extraordinary memory which puts great demands on the narratological skills of viewers (a joke in episode 79, the last episode of Season Four, required viewers to recall a dress Willow wore in episode 1), and such help is most welcome, although such guidance is already available on the web (at such unauthorized, superb free sites as Buffy Guide.com (<http://www.buffyguide.com/>) and Buffy World (<http://www.buffyworld.com/index.htm>)). The one completely unique section of the *Guide* is "Creating Buffy: The Production Process," which, through interviews and commentary focusing on the creation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Season episode "The I in Team," takes us deep behind the scenes of the ever-amazing process of TV creation. It is must-reading for anyone hopeful of unraveling the continuing mystery of how quality television happens in spite of the time and money constraints of the medium.

**These two *BtVS* companions**, though useful and comprehensive and well done, pale by comparison as books with the brilliantly conceived and beautifully designed (by Dan Newman) *The Sopranos: A Family History*. Purporting to be the by-product of author Allen Rucker's assignment to organize a massive archive on the Sopranos family assembled by an expert on organized crime named Jeffrey Warwick, this coffee-table book presents itself as "little more than journalistic housecleaning" compared to "Warwick's Herculean efforts." At the outset we find a list of contributors: a group that includes all the people Warwick and Rucker supposedly spoke to, from ex-gangsters now in the witness protection program to Tony Soprano's favorite teacher, to Livid Sopranos' briefly employed geriatric caregiver. Jeffrey Warwick, of course, is actually a character on *The Sopranos* (as are many of the other contributors), appearing on television in an episode like "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti" (Season One, Episode 8), sharing his knowledge of the New Jersey mob with local media. One day, we are told, Wernick will tell all, but "the Sopranos story is a long way from over" (aka the series is still ongoing), and in the meantime we will have to make due with his assistant's pastiche assemblage of Sopraniana. False modesty is part of Rucker's fiction of course. The book offers all the givens of a TV companion volume: an interview with series creator David Chase (who, the official Sopranos website tells us, "was instrumental in developing the look and content of the book"), profiles of each of the major players, and an authoritative episode summary,<sup>1</sup> but it is hard to imagine a book of its kind any more original than

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<sup>1</sup> I did find three errors in the episode guide. We are told that, after the Junior-ordered, unsuccessful hit (in "Isabella"), Tony crashes "his Suburban into a tree," when in fact he smashes into some parked cars. In "Guy Walks into a

this. ("As the Bible is to Western thought," David Chase proclaims on the website, "so is *The Sopranos: A Family History* to the field of companion books"!)

In ten chapters—*The Sopranos*, *A Soprano Family History*, *Tony's Children*, *The Soprano Crime Family*, *Life with Livia*, *Tony and Carmela*, *Tony on the Couch*, *The Business*, *Growing Up Soprano*, and *The Future*—Rucker presents us with deep background on the series in a variety of forms. We are privy to FBI e-mails detailing what is known about both of Tony Soprano's families; insights into New Jersey's immigrant population from a Newark Public Library expert; family photos (some from the old world); the crudely-conceived family trees of AJ (Anthony Soprano, Junior); FBI surveillance transcripts; probation reports; a 1975 letter on Tony Soprano's behalf by an English teacher seeking to prevent him from being expelled; a college letter from Tony to Carmela; Johnny Boy Soprano's arrest record; a page from Christopher Moltisanti's awful unfinished screenplay, "You Bark, I Bite"; confidential reports on Livia Soprano (including complaints filed by fellow residents) from the Green Grove Retirement Home; a letter from Carmela to her interior decorator declining an offer to have her home featured in "New Jersey Today;" a list of materials found in the Sopranos' trash; Carmela's ten favorite movies (from a contest at her video store); an "abridged dictionary of Northeastern regional mob patois"; a diagram of the Sopranos' cashflow; a "body count" roster of those who have (allegedly) died at the hands of the Sopranos; transcripts of Meadow Sopranos' visits to an online chatroom; Meadow's Discover Card bill; Joan O'Connell Scriver's equivocal letter of recommendation for Meadow to Georgetown (written as a result of Carmela's mob-mom encouragement)—and this is only a partial list.

The result of this polyphony of voices is a simulated oral history in which the series' already rich, multi-dimensional characters and its meticulously genuine milieu are realized even further. There is so much even a faithful watcher of the series would never have known: that Tony hates Bruce Springsteen (because the music of his fellow Jerseyite is too depressing), that Livia's father was a Eugene Debs style socialist, that Tony subscribes to *Waste News*, that Livia had an annoying neighborhood dog whacked, that the yearly income of Paulie Walnuts is between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a year; that at Seton Hall Tony hired another student to write his English paper for him ("*Symbolism in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*"—it received a B+); that Janice Soprano's estranged son Harpo may have changed his name to Hal after being beaten up on the playground . . .

**In a classic essay on cult movies** and "intertextual collage," Umberto Eco observes that one given of *The Cult* is its ability to "provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the secret recognize through each other a shared experience" (*Travels in Hyperreality* 198). These three books, inspired by commercial motives but each in its own way if not a "holy" text at least an essential Baedeker, will appeal most to cult followers of *Buffy* and *The Sopranos*—to those always ready, despite the dangers, to drop in, at the next possible opportunity, to

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Psychiatrist's Office," Philly Parisi "runs into Gigi Cestone (working for Tony) at the airport and gets summarily whacked." In fact, Parisi had unwittingly gone to the airport specifically to pick his killer up. And Sandra Bernhard's name (she appears in "D-Girl") is spelled wrong (Bernhardt). Picky, picky? Perhaps, but this is, after all, an "official" companion.

Sunnydale and/or Northern New Jersey, great places to visit, via the imagination, if not to live.

**David Lavery is Professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, where he teaches courses in popular culture, film studies, and science fiction. He is the author of *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age* (1992) and editor/co-editor of *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks* (1994), *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files* (1996), and *Twin Peaks in the Rearview Mirror: Appraisals and Reappraisals of the Show that Was Supposed to Change TV* and (with Rhonda V. Wilcox) *Fighting the Forces: Essays on the Meaning of Buffv the Vampire Slayer* (both forthcoming). He has also begun to assemble a book of essays on *The Sopranos*.**