

A Little Extra Bite: Dis/Ability and Romance in Tanya Huff and Charlaine Harris's Vampire Fiction

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Published online: 4 August 2010

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: This essay examines Tanya Huff's *Blood Price* and Charlaine Harris's *Dead Until Dark* through the lenses of Disability and Feminist Studies to suggest that in these works disability functions as a reclamation of the female body--which has often been viewed as "always and already" deformed--even as it contributes to the reinvention of the vampire romance genre.

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Keywords: Blood Price, Charlaine Harris, Dead Until Dark, Gothic, Kathleen Miller, Tanya Huff, Vampire

With the phenomenal commercial success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series and the profits earned internationally by the Swedish art-house film *Let the Right One In*, vampires—and more specifically, vampire-human romance narratives—have become big business. Demand for such works has prompted numerous publishers and media conglomerates to “stake” their claim to this burgeoning genre. And while much critical attention has been paid to some of the gothic vampire stories in modern settings—particularly to the American UPN-TV network's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—others have, so to speak, swooped beneath the scholarly radar. Among these are such popular titles as Tanya Huff's *Blood Books* and Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, despite each having inspired long-running series of novels, legions of devoted fans, and multi-media

spinoffs.^[1] In fact, Huff's and Harris's works have appealed to global audiences, although both are tied to very specific cultural landscapes: Huff's Canadian mysteries are set in Toronto, while Harris's tales are located in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana.^[2] The TV dramatization of Huff's novels, *Blood Ties*, was relatively short-lived, airing for only one season on Canada's Space and Citytv networks and two seasons on Lifetime Television in the US, but *True Blood*, the adaptation of Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, has garnered high ratings and, in effect, has "resurrected" the HBO cable network.^[3]

Some of the attraction of Huff's and Harris's texts undoubtedly rests in their capacity to translate well into different media and genres, and thus to reach diverse audiences. Both series, which are full of action and suspense, have been marketed as general fiction, as science fiction, and as mysteries. These novels and their television adaptations are, however, also courtship narratives that borrow heavily from the romance tradition and, perhaps less obviously, narratives that focus on issues of physical ability and disability.^[4] As scholarship by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mary Klages, and Martha Stoddard Holmes on the literature of disability helps us to see, feminist statements in Huff's *Blood Price* and Harris's *Dead Until Dark* come filtered through the texts' compelling narratives of disability. Each work advances a red-herring theory that vampirism is actually a disability, a form of chronic illness; nonetheless, despite their "disability," the vampires prove to be "hyper-able"—destined to live eternally, impervious to most bodily threats, and uncannily gifted as lovers. Yet vampires are not the only ones to challenge categories of ability and normalcy in these texts, for the central human characters are disabled heroines, who also prove extraordinarily able. Huff's female protagonist, Vicki Nelson, has a degenerative eye condition, while Harris's protagonist, Sookie Stackhouse, identifies her telepathy as a "disability." Vampires prove to be appropriate suitors for these heroines because each partner is "othered" by society. Through their status as heroines with seemingly disabling "differences," Vicki and Sookie display their various abilities, including their strength, insight, and romantic desirability. Furthermore, negotiating and embracing their disabilities leads them to challenge existing notions of gender roles and to construct new alternatives for female accomplishment. Much like that of the supernatural vampire, the disabled female physical body becomes extraordinary, as it helps the protagonists to counter threats of violence and to protect themselves and those around them.

According to Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, the romance novel is a "work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more of its heroines" (14). Regis claims that all romance fiction contains eight elements that mark the genre: a definition of the social background, the meeting between the heroine and hero, their mutual attraction, the barrier between them, the point of ritual death (the moment in the text when it seems impossible for the heroine and hero to reconcile), the recognition that eliminates the barrier, the declaration of love made by the heroine and hero, and their betrothal (14). In the case of the humans-meet-vampires tales, the first novels of each series—Huff's *Blood Price* and Harris's *Dead Until Dark*—display many, if not all, of these key romance elements while constructing compelling courtship plots that both complement and further the texts' corresponding elements of mystery and terror. In Huff's *Blood Price*, Vicki (Victoria) Nelson, a former police officer, solves crimes perpetrated by supernatural villains, while negotiating the advances of two different figures: the charismatic vampire and writer of historical romances, Henry Fitzroy (the illegitimate son of Henry VIII); and her hard-boiled former partner on the police force, Mike Celluci.

Similarly, the heroine of Harris's first vampire mystery *Dead Until Dark*, Sookie Stackhouse, attempts to catch a local killer as she sorts out her feelings for Bill Compton (a Civil-War-era vampire) and his rival—a false suitor—her boss, Sam Merlotte (a shapeshifter).

Vampire romance narratives such as these texts, which grow out of the female gothic romance tradition, are often read through a feminist lens. Feminist critics have, in particular, fastened upon and drained every last drop of meaning from the American television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, conceived by Joss Whedon, while analyzing it as an example of “girl-power.” Although *Buffy* has been lauded as a feminist text and thus as an antidote to the misogynist contagion allegedly spread by Meyer's *Twilight*, the genre of vampire romance in general has received far more negative than positive attention. A part of *Buffy*'s popularity as a feminist icon stems from its manipulation of the romance genre. While the series features many prominent romance plots, the show does not focus primarily on the courtship or betrothal of its heroine. Ultimately, Buffy does not marry, or commit herself, to any of her suitors—Angel, Riley, or Spike. On the other hand, *Twilight*, whose dominant narrative arc focuses on the courtship of Bella Swan and Edward Cullen, has received much censure of its romance plot, perhaps growing out of widespread academic disapproval of the romance genre.^[5] To varying degrees, Kay Mussell, Jan Cohn, Jeanne Dubino, Janice Radway, and Ann Cranny-Francis have all taken the romance genre to task for glamorizing its heroines' “passivity” and “powerlessness” and for reducing its readers, by extension, to childlike helplessness (Regis 5). For critics of the romance novel, the vampire romance narrative, which often couples a vulnerable human heroine with a dangerous, physically superior and much older male vampire, only exacerbates the gender inequality which they see the romance genre itself as fostering.

Gothic romance fiction, of which vampire fiction is a part, goes back to the eighteenth century and to the female gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe (Modleski 15). This genre has received harsh criticism from scholars such as Tania Modleski and Diane Long Hoeveler, while in her *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, Michelle Massé goes so far as to suggest that women's masochistic desires lie at the heart of gothic romance. Massé asserts that the genre encourages women readers to repeat cultural trauma, especially through the genre's “happy ending” of romantic betrothal, which allegedly reifies dangerous social ideologies about submission, love, and power between the genders (2). While I do not claim that all vampire romance fiction—or all female gothic fiction—possesses a feminist agenda, I do contend that a wholesale dismissal of these genres as sexist, misogynist, and harmful to female readers is reductive and insulting to their audiences. Like any other fiction, gothic vampire romances have the potential to offer both their heroines and their readers numerous alternative romance trajectories and diverse depictions of gendered relationships. As Pamela Regis, who persuasively argues in defense of the romance, has stated, “The [romance] genre is not about women's bondage, as the literary critics would have it. The romance novel is, to the contrary, about women's freedom. The genre is popular because it conveys the pain, uplift, and joy that freedom brings” (xiii).

In the case of vampire romances such as *Blood Price* and *Dead Until Dark*, as well as their television adaptations *Blood Ties* and *True Blood*, the texts present readers with messages of female freedom and gender equality, rather than merely stories of submission and gendered power imbalances, through the texts' compelling narratives of disability. As mentioned previously, in these works, vampires are categorized as having a form of

disability, although each work ultimately cites a supernatural cause, rather than a disease, as the cause of the hero's vampirism. In all cases, though, despite their "disability," the vampires prove to be "hyper-able." While endowing male vampires with hyper-abilities may seem to support the feminist accusation that a gendered power imbalance exists at the center of gothic romance, both Vicki and Sookie are disabled heroines, who also prove extraordinarily able.

When readers meet Vicki, she has a degenerative condition known as retinitis pigmentosa, or "tunnel vision," which can lead to permanent blindness. After her failing eyesight disqualifies her from street work and forces her into a desk job, Vicki leaves the police force and begins working as a private investigator. Her visual impairment certainly qualifies as a contemporary category of disability. Sookie's "disorder," on the other hand, does not correspond to the usual definitions of disability in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century legal, medical, and educational discourses. According to these definitions, disabilities "designat[e] a socially-constructed category that groups together people with a wide variety of physical and mental differences, including limb deficiencies, neuromuscular and orthopedic dysfunctions, sensory impairment, mental impairment (including both mental illness and mental retardation), and chronic or terminal illness" (Klages 1). Sookie does not have such an impairment or deficiency; she is a telepath, someone with the extra "ability" to read minds. Unlike Vicki, whose glasses offer a visible sign of her physical challenge, Sookie possesses a faculty that is invisible. Sookie herself, however, labels this mental power a "disability" (2) and sees it as a marker of her "physical and mental difference."

Mary Klages, Martha Stoddard Holmes, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have all noted that historically, as a literary trope, disability has signaled pity, inferiority, weakness, vulnerability, monstrosity, and barriers to marriage. In nineteenth-century British fiction, characters such as Charles Dickens's Tiny Tim and George Eliot's Philip Wakem evoke sympathy; while Dr. Frankenstein's "patch-worked" creation becomes a "monster," and disabled women such as the eponymous heroine of Dinah Maria Craik's *Olive* are denied the ability to reproduce, if they can even find (able-bodied) suitors at all. Although Garland-Thomson demonstrates that depictions of disability in contemporary fiction have altered significantly over time—disabled women are also powerful figures for African-American writers such as Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary* 103-134)—discomfort with, and discrimination against, disabled bodies has continued well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In *Blood Price* and *Dead Until Dark*, however, it is through their status as heroines with seemingly disabling "differences" that Vicki and Sookie display their various abilities—their strength, alternative insight, and romantic desirability. Furthermore, negotiating and embracing their disabilities leads them to their greatest professional and personal successes, as they challenge existing notions of gender roles and construct new alternatives for female accomplishment. Much like that of the supernatural vampire, the disabled female physical body becomes extraordinary, as it helps to defeat threats of violence and to protect both the heroines themselves and those around them.

In these works, disability functions as a reclamation of the female body (which has often been viewed as "other," or as "always and already" deformed), even as it contributes to the reinvention of the vampire romance genre.^[6] Here it is worth noting that Vicki and Sookie do not have readily apparent physical disabilities. However, in spite of their

invisible impairments, both heroines are clearly described as experiencing an experience of social disablement. The texts suggest that disability is an identity that is ascribed to their female bodies, one linked to stigma and prejudice in their interpersonal relationships, professional endeavors, and educational opportunities. Over the course of the novels, with the assistance of their “othered” vampire suitors, disability becomes an identity that Vicki and Sookie willingly adopt, yet only once it has been removed from its common associations of dependency, incompleteness, vulnerability, and incompetency (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating” 261).^[7]

The field of Disability Studies remains a relatively new academic enterprise, despite the fact that, as Lennard J. Davis writes:

As 15 percent of the population, people with disabilities make up the largest physical minority within the United States.... [If] the population of people with disabilities is between thirty-five and forty-three million, then this group is the largest physical minority in the United States. Put another way, there are more people with disabilities than there are African Americans and Latinos. (xv)

Earlier discussions of the female body and race in feminist and gothic scholarship often involved the types of questions and issues that are now being explored by Disability Studies scholars.^[8] While Disability Studies has received far less critical attention than Women’s Studies, the two prove to be highly compatible fields of enquiry and activism. In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson asserts that both feminism and Disability Studies work to challenge existing social relations; resist interpretations of certain bodily configurations and functioning as deviant; question the ways that differences are invested with meaning; examine the enforcement of universalizing norms; interrogate the politics of appearance; explore the politics of naming; and forge positive identities (22).

Further, Disability Studies illuminates the long history of misogynist writing about the female body, dating back to Classical Greece. In the fourth book of his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle states that anyone who does not take after his or her parents is a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has deviated from the generic type. He cites the first deviation as when female was formed instead of male (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary* 19). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes that here Aristotle sets up a masculine “generic type” against which all physical variation appears as different, derivative, inferior, and insufficient. This establishes the Western tradition of viewing woman as a “diminished man,” one who is monstrous, and is the first step on a “path to deviance.” She writes:

The definition arranges a somatic diversity into a hierarchy of value that assigns completeness to some bodies and deficiency to others. Furthermore, by defining femaleness as deviant and maleness as essential, Aristotle initiates the discursive practice of marking what is deemed aberrant while concealing what is privileged behind an assertion of normalcy. (*Extraordinary* 20)

In both *Blood Price* and *Dead Until Dark*, the fictional heroines challenge the superiority of the what is deemed *normal* and the inferiority of the gendered female body, through their exceptional dis/abilities, as well as through the elements of the romance plot.

The Blood is the (Love) Life: The Power of Romantic Vision in *Blood Price* and *Blood Ties*

In Tanya Huff's *Blood Price*, readers first encounter Vicki Nelson through her visual impairment: "She took off her glasses and scrubbed at one lens with a fold of her sweatshirt. The edges of her world blurred until it looked as if she were staring down a foggy tunnel; a wide tunnel, more than adequate for day to day living. So far, she'd lost about a third of her peripheral vision. So far. It could only get worse" (16). Unable to perform the duties of a homicide investigator—due, in particular, to her night blindness—she has quit the police force, where she formerly was known as "Victory" Nelson. For Vicki, her disability is accompanied by great uncertainty. Although her condition may not ultimately lead to complete blindness, it is nonetheless irreversible and incurable, and her response is to feel anger. As she tells her doctor, "My condition [...] as you call it, caused me to leave a job I loved that made a difference for the better in the slime-pit this city is becoming and if it's all the same to you, I think I'd rather be bitter" (45).

In an attempt to reclaim her life (and pay her bills), Vicki becomes a private investigator, at first suffering through boring and unchallenging cases. But after the city of Toronto experiences a series of mysterious, unsolved homicides, Vicki is hired by Coreen Ferguson to track down her boyfriend's killer. The bodies of the victims have been drained of blood, and so the media begins to report that the killer is a vampire. In actuality, the killer is a demon—an evil being summoned by a sociopathic college student who, in a clever homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and *The Birds*, is named Norman Birdwell. The nerdy and socially isolated Norman plans to use this demon to wreak vengeance on all those who have taunted and rejected him. With her intelligence, perseverance, and courage, Vicki identifies the killer. And with some help from her two romantic suitors, Mike Celluci and Henry Fitzroy, Vicki defeats both Norman and the malevolent forces he has summoned. As Vicki begins her new career, she embarks on a journey of personal, professional, and romantic discovery that enables her, despite her literal blindness, to see herself, and the world around her, with more accurate vision.

A large part of Vicki's past, her life as an able-bodied detective, was her relationship with her former partner, known merely as "Celluci." Vicki and Celluci were not only partners, but friends. And for four of the eight years they worked together, they were lovers. As the novel opens, readers learn that in the eight months since she has left the force, she and Celluci have had no contact; yet when they start working the same murder cases, their paths cross again, and their bantering "friends-with-benefits" romance resumes. There are, nonetheless, numerous barriers to Celluci and Vicki recognizing and declaring their mutual affection, in order to reach the betrothal stage that romance fiction requires. Their complicated relationship is explored, but not resolved, in *Blood Price*. One obstacle to their romantic union is Vicki's uncertainty about the parameters of their new

relationship. She fears that if they become a couple, and fail, she will lose a good friend; whereas “lovers are easy to get [...] friends good enough to scream at are a lot rarer” (47).

Perhaps a more difficult and significant obstacle to overcome is Celluci’s attitude towards Vicki’s disability. Unlike some narratives of disability that deny female characters’ sexuality and desirability, *Blood Price* shows Celluci physically attracted to Vicki: “Sometime later, Vicki shifted to reach a particularly sensitive area and decided, as she got the anticipated inarticulate response, that there were times when you really didn’t need to see what you were doing and night blindness mattered not in the least” (40). Thus, Huff provides her heroine with a healthy sexual identity, despite her disability.

Vicki’s disability, however, creates other difficulties. Early in the novel, Celluci is established as the epitome of a natural-bodied strong male, aware of his own power and authority: “[Vicki] looked down at the toes of her boots, then up at Mike. At five ten she didn’t look up to many men but Celluci, at six four, practically made her feel petite” (14). His new consciousness of her physical limitations increases his controlling and paternalistic behavior, as he cautions her against taking certain cases, invades her personal space (by pushing her glasses back onto her face from the tip of her nose), and attempts to take over management of her body (telling her what vitamins will “cure” her condition). Ultimately, his concern leads him to infantilize her, as he tries to force Vicki into dealing with her disability in a way that makes sense to him, a way that will allow her to lead a “normal” life (46). Upset that she has continued to track a murderer, despite her retinitis pigmentosa, he shouts, “You are no longer on the force, you are virtually blind at night, and you are more likely to end up as the corpse than the hero” (78). Ultimately, Vicki does not allow Celluci’s anxiety over her safety to restrict her actions; instead when he urges her to be careful, she asks him, in turn, to stop being a “patronizing son of a bitch” (116).

Celluci cannot understand, in particular, Vicki’s decision to leave the police force. He sees nothing wrong with Vicki accepting a demotion to a desk job—a role that would supposedly better suit her “diminished” abilities—and erupts in anger:

[Oh] no, you couldn’t stand the thought that you wouldn’t be the hot-shit investigator anymore, the fair-haired girl with all the answers, that you’d just be a part of the team. You quit because you couldn’t stand not being on the top of the pile and if you weren’t on top, if you couldn’t be on top, you weren’t going to play! So you ran away. You took your pail and your shovel and you fucking quit! You walked out on me, Nelson, not just the job!’ (47)

Clearly, Vicki’s exercise of autonomy presents a psychological and emotional barrier for Celluci, who associates her reaction to her medical condition with a “betrayal” of both their professional and romantic partnerships.

In addition, Celluci proves unable to accept the supernatural aspect of the killings, which further divides him from Vicki. His character exemplifies the hard-boiled, rational masculinity of the detective novel tradition, and he routinely taunts Vicki for her acceptance of theories that suggest the crimes could be supernatural in origin. Even after he witnesses the death of Norman Birdwell and the materialization of the demon lord, he refuses to acknowledge fully what he has seen: “This was worse than anything Celluci could have imagined. He hadn’t seen the punk with the assault rifle disappear into thin air. He didn’t see the thing standing in the middle of the room smiling. But he had. And he did”

(266). Moreover, he continues to trust in the power of the police force to stop the demon (267). When he files his report of the night's events, he leaves out pertinent information related to the killings and concludes, "It won't do my arrest record any good, but the killings will stop and I figure [Norman] got what was coming to him" (270). Unlike Celluci, though, Vicki begins to see the world (and crime) differently, in large part due to her physically altered sight. As Celluci chooses not to join her in these new beliefs, Vicki's romantic vision of him changes. Prior to her disability, Vicki perceived Celluci as a valued partner, both on-and off-the-force; however, now she acknowledges that he lacks some of her professional and personal abilities and insights.

On the other hand, Vicki's second suitor, the vampire Henry Fitzroy, encourages Vicki's acceptance of the supernatural. He also prompts her to forge a new relationship to her disability and to the world around her, as she arrives at a fresh understanding of her own identity. Interestingly, Henry, the four-hundred-and-fifty-year-old vampire who was the bastard child of Henry VIII, is a writer of historical romance novels and a romantic at heart. After many years of bachelorhood, he wants something "more" in his life (23)—a connection to another human being beyond casual sex and blood feeding (53). Huff uses the character of Henry to mock critics of the romance genre cleverly and good-naturedly: "Henry [...wondered...] why some people had less trouble handing the idea of a vampire than they did a romance writer" (124). In *Blood Ties*, Henry becomes an author of graphic novels, a genre typically thought of as more masculine than the "feminine" romance. Regardless, both versions of Henry are empathic; ready for, and receptive to, the world of feeling, intuition, and emotion—the world that Mike Celluci disdains.

Much as Mike's imposing height (which evidences his paternalism) illuminates gendered hierarchies in Vicki's relationship with him, so Henry's centuries-old existence lends his relationship with the mortal Vicki some inequalities in terms of knowledge, experience, and power. Huff, however, introduces elements that illuminate Vicki's potential equality in the relationship. Henry is, for example, shorter than Vicki (160). In addition, while her disease makes her unable to see in the dark, Henry is hyper-sensitive to the light. They make good crime solving partners, for their conditions are the yin and yang of disabilities. Also, Vicki accepts Henry's disability—i.e., his vampirism—and does not judge him or try to curb his nature.^[9]

As with Celluci, Vicki and Henry have a mutual physical attraction. When Henry is wounded and needs blood to survive, Vicki allows him to drink from her. He says, "I could feel your life, and I could feel the desire rising to take it" (218). Vicki too remains haunted by their intimate exchange, saying to herself, "*Wonderful. The city—the world even—is about to go up in flames and I'm thinking with my crotch*" (223, emphasis in original). Although she and Mike worked together while being romantically involved, their relationship was not allowed to "interfere" with their work (66). Yet her inability with Henry to compartmentalize her professional and personal desires enables her to transform. Through her partnership with Henry, Vicki changes from a no-nonsense, emotionally closed-off cop who hates and resents her disabled body, into a receptive and aware woman who has the potential for a fulfilling romance, and who embraces the alternative insights that acceptance of her new dis/abilities and new identity provides.

Over the course of the novel, Vicki experiences transformations in her understanding of her disability, of her world, and of new possibilities for romance. She takes on the unsolved murders to prove that, despite her condition, she is a fully

functioning member of society (84). Soon, she no longer “sees” herself as a cop, but rather in a more important role, as a “one-woman chance of stopping Armageddon” (227).

Early in the narrative, Vicki hesitates to give full credence to the existence of vampires, but she comes to accept whatever will keep her safe: “And it’s not that *I* believe in vampires[...] *I* believe in keeping an open mind. *And,*’ she added silently, grimly, her mind on Tony and his crucifix, ‘*I, too believe in stayin’ alive*” (81, emphasis in original). On first reading newspaper reports of vampires, she “tilted her chair back, she scrubbed her glasses and let her world narrow into a circle of stucco ceiling. More things in heaven and earth ... She didn’t know if she believed in vampires, but she definitely believed in her own senses, even if one of them had become less reliable of late” (30). Eventually, the protagonist’s acceptance of the supernatural fuses with her coming to terms with her diminished eyesight. As someone who has always worked intuitively (72), she must learn, now more than ever, to rely on her senses and her gut feelings. Her cases with Henry strain reason and credulity, as she uncovers what cannot be seen or readily understood, even with the (able) naked eye.

Metaphors involving sight and knowledge appear throughout the text. When Mike taunts her about believing in vampires, she responds, “‘At least I’m not so caught up in my cleverness that I’m *blind* to outside possibilities!’” (40, emphasis added). The idea of vision recurs, with the narrator commenting that “In eight years on the force, she’d *seen* a lot of strangeness and been forced to believe in the existence of things that most sane people—police officers and social workers excepted—preferred to ignore. Next to some of the cruelties the strong inflicted on the weak, vampires and demons weren’t that hard to swallow” (106, emphasis added). Vicki realizes that the evil she has witnessed does not vary greatly from the monstrosities of supernatural or otherworldly violence; during her final confrontation with Norman and the demon lord he has summoned, Vicki is grateful for her decreased vision: “she attempted to breathe shallowly through her teeth, glad for the first time she couldn’t really see” (262). Though she may not literally see the clear outlines of Norman and the demon in the darkened room, her ability to open herself to alternative forms of sight and vision—to refuse to be “blind” to supernatural possibilities—allows her to solve the murders and eventually to defeat the demonic evil. As Henry proudly observes, Vicki does not have tunnel vision; she will adjust her “worldview” to fit the facts of the situation (92).

Though the violence has abated by the end of the novel, the courtship plot has yet to be resolved. Despite his inability to articulate his feelings, Celluci clearly cares for Vicki and visits her in the hospital, where she is recovering. Fishing for information, he refers to Henry as her “new boyfriend” (270)—an assumption Vicki neither confirms nor denies. It is clear to the reader, however, that she no longer feels bound exclusively to Celluci. The narrator says this of Vicki’s reaction to Celluci’s police report and to the outcome of the case: “[She] wasn’t sure she agreed so she kept silent. It smacked too much of an eye for an eye. *And the whole world ends up blind*” (270, emphasis in original). Whereas Celluci thinks that Norman got what he deserved and is content to hide or deny the supernatural nature of the case, Vicki is less sure about this righting of the scales of justice. She is also unwilling to explain away the supernatural elements of the murder mystery. Thus, it is apparent that, like the reader of vampire romances, she is unsatisfied merely with Celluci’s *blind* world view.

On the other hand, the end of the narrative also opens the possibility of a romantic union between Henry and Vicki, though readers know their courtship will not be smooth. Aware of the potential power differential between them, Vicki says, "With four hundred and fifty years of experience, he had enough cards already" (271); yet she ultimately leaves room for romance: "Would he understand what she was offering? Did she? 'We can have dinner'" (272). When Henry asks whether she believes in destiny, she replies, "'I believe in truth. I believe in justice. I believe in my friends. I believe in myself.' She hadn't for awhile but now she did again. 'And I believe in vampires'" (272). Her belief signals recognition and serves as a form of declaration—a declaration of openness and of romantic potential, perhaps even of eventual betrothal. Disability, which traditionally has been the barrier to literary courtship, is not the obstacle here; instead, it illuminates and undermines Celluci's machismo and strengthens Vicki's bond with Henry. Rather than reifying stereotypical gender roles, it opens up new possibilities, with both male suitors. Furthermore, disability leads to the female protagonist's professional success, financial independence, and personal fulfillment, as she develops a "second sight" for the supernatural, one that actually heightens her crime-solving abilities, making her now, more than ever, "Victory" Nelson.

Till Death Do Us Part: Mind-Reading and Romance in *Dead Until Dark* and *True Blood*

In Charlaine Harris's *Dead Until Dark*, Sookie Stackhouse lives in a society in which vampires have "come out of the coffins." In other words, they have become legal citizens, as Japanese scientists have developed a synthetic blood that makes it possible for vampires to live in the open without the need to hunt humans for sustenance. Set in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, the narrative links human prejudice against vampires to the history of slavery, racism, sexism, and homophobia in the American South. The opening credits of *True Blood*, Alan Ball's television adaptation of the novels, feature an eerie montage of erotic and religious images, including one of a noticeboard outside a church that reads, "God Hates Fangs." (Of course, this sign alludes to actual prejudices that exist outside the text, playing on similarities between the words "fangs" and "fags.") In this not-so-brave new world, Sookie must negotiate her relationships with humans and vampires, while at the same time struggling to confront her "disability."

Although Sookie may not fit the qualifications for disability as many contemporary readers or viewers would conceive of it, the amended Americans with Disabilities Act of 2008 reads that "disability depends upon perception and subjective judgment rather than on objective bodily states" (6). The law acknowledges that

being legally disabled is also a matter of 'being regarded as having such an impairment.' Essential but implicit to this definition is that both 'impairment' and 'limits' depend on comparing individual bodies with unstated but determining norms, a hypothetical set of guidelines for corporeal form and function arising from cultural expectations about how human beings should look and act. (Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 6-7)

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains that, although these expectations may reflect physiological norms, their “sociopolitical meanings and consequences are entirely culturally determined” (7). Hence, Sookie, who views herself as “disabled,” along with the surrounding inhabitants of Bon Temps who categorize her abilities as mental impairment or “craziness,” dictate a culturally determined reading of Sookie’s telepathy as a “disability” (2).

Moreover, Sookie’s mind-reading does, initially, impair and limit the quality of her life. As the novel begins, her parents are already dead, but readers learn that her telepathy had caused fear, confusion, and estrangement in her family:

My parents didn’t know what to do about me. It embarrassed my father, in particular. My mother finally took me to a child psychologist, who knew exactly what I was, but she just couldn’t accept it and kept trying to tell my folks I was reading their body language and was very observant[....] Of course she couldn’t admit I was literally *hearing people’s thoughts* because that just didn’t fit into her world. (51-52, emphasis in original)

Sookie’s brother, Jason, a self-absorbed, highly promiscuous “party-boy,” also rejected his sister and her uncanny abilities. At school, moreover, Sookie’s telepathy caused problems, for her teachers thought she was learning-disabled and inflicted on her a series of invasive tests (52). As her inability to concentrate limited her opportunities for higher education, she was forced to take menial jobs in order to be financially independent. Her telepathy has continued to cause difficulties at the bar where she works as a waitress; she must consciously keep her mind out of her co-workers’ thoughts: “I never listen to Sam’s thoughts. He’s my boss. I’ve had to quit jobs before because I found out things I didn’t want to know about my boss” (4). Perhaps most troubling to Sookie is her feeling that her telepathy has cut her off from romantic relationships. At twenty-five, she has remained a virgin, because

sex, for me, is a disaster. Can you imagine knowing everything your sex partner is thinking? Right. Along the order of ‘Gosh, look at that mole ... her butt is a little big ... wish she’d move to the right a little.’ [...] You get the idea. It’s chilling to the emotions, believe me. And during sex, there is simply no way to keep a mental guard up. (25)

Although Sam briefly serves as a false suitor in *Dead Until Dark*, her ability to read his thoughts, as well as her discomfort over complicating their work and personal relationships, leads Sookie to forgo this courtship with a human man. Instead, the narrative ultimately focuses on the romance of one woman, Sookie, and one “man,” Bill.

Sookie’s feelings about her disability and her potential for romance transform when she meets Bill, the vampire. Bill is immediately fascinated by her, saying, “You’re different [...] What are you?” (13). Although he cannot identify her telepathy, he senses her otherness. He proves unable to “glamour,” or control her mind, and this resistance to his supernatural charms marks her as independent and desirable. Furthermore, the difference he senses in Sookie constitutes a feeling of commonality between them; neither is precisely

like a “normal” human. Sookie, too, is attracted to Bill, and her interest in him, coupled with her disability, enables her to save Bill’s life. When they first meet at Merlotte’s, the bar where Sookie works, Bill is sitting with a criminal couple, Mark and Denise Rattray. Worried for his safety, Sookie “lets her guard down” and reads the Rattrays’ minds. She realizes they plan to drain Bill’s blood and sell it illegally (vampire blood is said to have healing properties and to increase sexual potency). With this knowledge, Sookie follows, attacks, and stops the Rattrays. Thus, the heroine saves the (dead) hero’s life.

What had been deemed an obstacle to romance—i.e., Sookie’s “disability”—now becomes a significant point of attraction and aid in her courtship with Bill. He, in turn, provides a safe space for Sookie’s romantic exploration, as she cannot read his thoughts:

I did something I ordinarily would never do, because it was pushy, and personal, and revealed I was disabled. I turned fully to him and put my hands on both sides of his white face, and I looked at him intently. I focused with all my energy. *Nothing*. It was like having to listen to the radio all the time, to stations you didn’t get to select, and then suddenly tuning in to a wavelength you couldn’t receive. It was heaven. (12, emphasis in original)

Since Sookie is not subjected to the constant onslaught of Bill’s mental chattering, she does not need to divide her attention or keep up her guard, as she does with other residents in Bon Temps. Ironically, it is precisely this unknowability that allows her to come to know and understand Bill, through his words and deeds.

In fact, her lack of access to Bill’s mind often leads to the pair’s more conventional romantic complications and miscommunications. Like most couples, Bill and Sookie cannot read each other’s thoughts, and *Dead Until Dark* wittily and poignantly illuminates the psychological barriers present for most courting couples—barriers Sookie has not experienced with other people. In her previous relationships, she has remained distant, because of her easy entry into others’ private feelings. Now she can both learn from and share with a partner, at their mutual discretion. For example, as Bill tries to remember what it was like to be a “regular” person, he enquires about Sookie’s childhood. Here, she narrates the difficult memory of her Uncle Barlett’s sexual abuse, a secret she has kept hidden for many years and which has made her uncomfortable around men, especially in intimate situations (158-160). Now, she must be vulnerable and open, as she cannot rely upon receiving information through her telepathy. Her relationship with Bill provides her with a previously unknown sense of freedom and pleasure; the day after they make love for the first time, Sookie says, “boy, did I feel powerful. It was hard not to feel—well, cocky is surely the wrong word—maybe incredibly smug is closer” (146).

Even though Sookie is liberated by being unable to hear Bill’s thoughts, she does not “abandon” her disability. As she drinks Bill’s blood (in order to keep up her own strength after he feeds from her), these transfusions, which supposedly have healing properties, do not diminish Sookie’s “illness,” but instead enhance and focus her telepathy. This proves fortunate, for Sookie will need heightened abilities to protect her from a world in which she is under constant threat. Much like Vicki who dates the older powerful Henry, Sookie’s involvement with Bill places her in a relationship that presents danger and possibility of power imbalances. For example, Bill introduces Sookie to the worldly, predatory head vampire of the Bon Temps district, Eric. When Sookie uses her telepathy on Eric’s mind,

what she “reads” confuses and terrifies her: “it was like suddenly being plunged into a pit of snakes, cold snakes, lethal snakes. It was only a flash, a slice of his mind, sort of, but it left me facing a whole new reality” (202).

Eric soon becomes fascinated with Sookie’s telepathic powers and forces her to read the minds of his employees in order to find out who is embezzling from his club, Fangtasia. Afraid to resist Eric’s commands, Sookie uses her telepathic powers reveal the embezzler, the vampire Long Shadow. Infuriated, Long Shadow subsequently attacks and nearly kills her. Unlike the cold dread that first overcomes Sookie when she catches a glimpse of the evil in Eric’s mind, this harrowing experience causes her to become more assertive and aggressive. She forces Eric to negotiate new terms for any future telepathic services she may perform for him and she makes him agree to not retaliate against any future disloyal workers (206). Thus, Sookie’s relationship with Bill introduces her to more significant foes and causes her to develop new strengths.

Sookie will need this increased autonomous status to fight the series of brutal murders raging through Bon Temps. They represent the romance narrative’s point(s) of ritual death. In this case, however, the deaths are not ritual, so much as literal; a number of local women, women who have had sexual relationships with vampires, have been found raped and strangled. Sookie’s brother Jason, who had been involved with all of the murdered women, remains the police department’s prime suspect. But Sookie, whose romance with Bill has increased her confidence in herself and in her abilities, embraces her telepathy and tries to use it to clear her brother, by listening in on the thoughts of the residents of Bon Temps.

When this method proves futile, Sookie takes refuge at home. She too is a target, since she has had a sexual relationship with Bill; in fact, the killer murders her grandmother in an attempt to get to Sookie. When Sookie realizes the murderer has been in her house again, she abandons traditional means of protection, saying, “I might not have the rifle, but I had a built-in tool. I closed my eyes and reached out with my mind” (275). Using her telepathy, she locates the real murderer, Rene Lenier, and begins probing his thoughts. Although Rene has seemed a perfectly “normal” man—holding a respectable job while dating Sookie’s friend Arlene, and caring for her children—Sookie learns that his able-bodiedness and mental stability are an illusion. By delving into his twisted mental processes, she uncovers his motive for the murders—anger toward his sister, Cindy, who dated a vampire—and uses this information to taunt and distract him, until she is able to kill him with his own knife. Rene’s murderous rage and violence has made him monstrous. Thus, through her understanding and acceptance of her difference, Sookie not only challenges notions of gender and disability, but she solves the mystery, clears her brother, and protects both herself and the townspeople. Interestingly, *True Blood*, the television dramatization, uses the violent confrontation in *Dead Until Dark* to advance the romance plot, rather than to focus chiefly on the power of Sookie’s disability to secure her safety. Whereas in the novel Sookie defeats Rene on her own, in the adaptation both suitors, Sam *and* Bill, come to her aid. While neither man succeeds in killing Rene, both help Sookie to foil his murderous plot and protect herself.

By overcoming her view of her disability as a “barrier” and cheating (ritual) death, Sookie achieves union and freedom with Bill. Further, she gains self-acceptance and greater understanding of her own potential. At the novel’s end, recognition, declaration, and betrothal come in quick succession, as Sookie awakens in the hospital to find Bill watching

over her: “‘Soon we’ll be back to normal,’ Bill said, laying me down gently so he could switch out the light in the bathroom. He glowed in the dark. ‘Right,’ I whispered. ‘Yeah, back to normal’” (292). In these closing lines, Sookie acknowledges that normalcy is no longer her desired state. She now understands that no one is “normal”; the human and the vampire condition alike are states of disability, in which we all learn to negotiate our wants and desires both in spite of and, in large part, because of our extraordinary bodies.

Although *Blood Price* and *Dead Until Dark* advocate messages of female empowerment and ability through their heroine’s status as “disabled” characters, their transformations of dis/ability are not complete. Much like, in vampire literature, whenever someone is turned into a vampire, lingering traces of the individual’s original humanity remain. Similarly, these texts, along with the television adaptations of them, still re-inscribe certain cultural notions of desir/ability, namely as embodied in their heroines’ physical appearances. Vicki has an athlete’s body that can be maintained with little effort (30). Sookie tells readers, “You can tell I don’t get out much. And it’s not because I’m not pretty. I am. I’m blond and blue-eyed and twenty-five, and my legs are strong and my bosom is substantial, and I have a waspy waistline” (1). The creation in both novels of conventionally attractive, young, blonde, shapely heroines, as well as the casting of stars such as Christina Cox (Vicki Nelson, *Blood Ties*) and Anna Paquin (Sookie Stackhouse, *True Blood*), reaffirms conventional standards of able-bodied, western ideals of beauty. In *True Blood*, moreover, Paquin often appears in revealing, provocative clothing, and the camera frequently surveys her body in a heavily eroticized and objectifying gaze. However, in their depictions of the strength, power, and romantic success of their heroines, *Blood Price* and *Dead Until Dark* do challenge cultural notions of disability, even as they reclaim the vampire romance for new generations of readers—especially for those who appreciate feminist messages with a little extra bite.

[1] The *Blood Book* series consists of five novels—*Blood Price* (1991), *Blood Trail* (1992), *Blood Lines* (1992), *Blood Pact* (1993), *Blood Debt* (1997)—and one short story collection, *Blood Bank* (2006). At present, there are nine books in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*: *Dead Until Dark* (2001), *Living Dead in Dallas* (2002), *Club Dead* (2003), *Dead to the World* (2004), *Dead as a Doornail* (2005), *Definitely Dead* (2006), *All Together Dead* (2007), *From Dead to Worse* (2008), and *Dead and Gone* (2009).

[2] In 2007, Penguin USA re-released Huff’s books with new promotional covers, in conjunction with the debut of the novels’ television adaptation, *Blood Ties*. Harris’s books have been translated into numerous languages including Serbian, French, and Russian.

[3] Despite only modest ratings for their Canadian broadcasts, the two seasons of *Blood Ties* were released on DVD. Further, the show’s rights have been purchased internationally, and the program has aired in the US, the UK, Spain, and Latin America. In the US, the second-season premiere of *True Blood* was seen by 3.7 million viewers, becoming the most-watched HBO cable network TV program since the finale of *The Sopranos* two years earlier (Reynolds par. 1). The encore presentation drew 5.1 million viewers (Reynolds par. 4).

[4] The TV dramatizations of both *Blood Ties* and *True Blood* make the most of their sources’ romantic plots, emphasizing the works’ love triangles and sex scenes. For example, the

promotional material for *Blood Ties* highlights the central dilemma of the heroine, Vicki Nelson, whose loyalty to one suitor conflicts with her growing attraction to another. Advertisements for *True Blood* feature a provocatively clad Sookie Stackhouse lying beneath her lover, who has just punctured and penetrated her neck.

[5] For example, see Christine Seifert's "Bite Me! (Or Don't)."

[6] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson contends that the concept of disability has been used to cast broadly "the form and functioning of female bodies as non-normative" ("Integrating" 260), even when discussing those female bodies which are ostensibly able-bodied.

[7] Garland-Thomson notes that similar language is often used to represent female bodies.

[8] See Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, H.L. Malchow's *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, and Carol Margaret Davison's *Anti-Semitism and British Gothic Literature* for discussions of racial and sexual difference, configured as monstrosity and disability, in the gothic genre.

[9] Readers do not know whether or not Henry, in turn, accepts Vicki's disability, because she does not inform him of her retinitis pigmentosa.

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