



## Desperate Housewives

Tony Watkins

The biggest television hit in the USA since *ER* first aired has hit UK screens this year. Set in a wealthy and pristine suburban cul-de-sac, *Desperate Housewives* is a comedy soap with a distinctly satirical edge which explores the darker side of the American dream. On the surface the four central women have everything. But at the beginning of the first episode, another housewife friend goes through her normal routine of 'quietly polishing the routine of my life until it gleamed with perfection' – and then commits suicide. At the wake, Susan laments that their friend should have talked about her problems. But Gabrielle asks, 'What problems could she have had? She was healthy, had a great home, a nice family.'

Under the surface, however, all these women have times of desperation. Susan, a divorcee whose husband left her for his secretary, yearns to be loved again. Gabrielle's husband has given her everything she ever wanted (including a \$15,000 necklace), but she's come to realise she 'wanted all the wrong things.' She longs to be more than simply an essential but costly accessory for her husband. Bree has mastered the art of creating a perfect home to such an extent that her husband tells her he wants a divorce, saying, 'I just can't live in this detergent commercial any more.'

But the housewife whose struggles have most caught the minds of the show's American fans is Lynette, who gave up her high-powered career to look after her four children. The pressures of looking after them, with her husband often away, is overwhelming. Felicity Huffman, who plays Lynette, says about motherhood, 'It's not OK to say that it's hard and awful and boring, and I don't

know why.' The idea for the series came to creator Marc Cherry when he expressed amazement to his mother at the idea of a woman ever getting to the point of wanting to kill her children. When she replied, 'I've been there,' Cherry realised that most housewives probably mask feelings of desperation.

There are at least three significant aspects to the problem. First, looking after children full time is very hard work. Second, it's hard to be open about problems for fear of being seen as a bad mother. Third, there's almost no public recognition of what a crucial role in society this is. Psychologist Oliver James hopes that at least the third aspect may be about to change. Writing in *The Observer* (2 January 2005), he confidently proclaimed, 'This year will be the year the status of Mother rises.' Let's hope so – and maybe *Desperate Housewives* will make it a common topic of conversation.