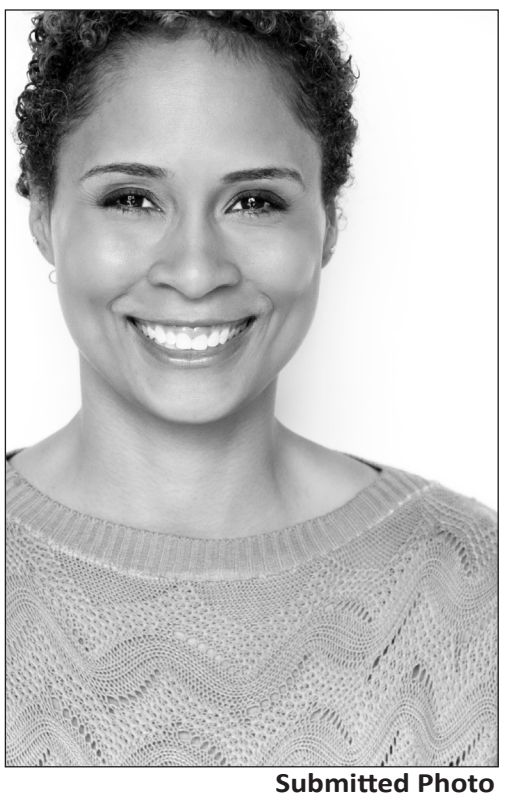
Q&A with screenwriter and Truman alumna Akela Cooper

BY KATEY STOETZEL,
Features Editor

Screenwriter and Truman State alumna Akela Cooper will be the guest speaker today for the English and Linguistics Senior Seminar conference. Cooper also will give a talk tomorrow about using folklore in screenwriting. An Index editor had the chance to speak with Cooper during a phone interview this week about what it's like to write for TV and the popularity of genre television.

Katey Stoetzel: How did you get into television writing, especially when Truman didn't have any screenwriting classes until recently?

Akela Cooper: I graduated in the fall of 2003. A couple of my professors, Dr. Becky Becker and Dr. Adam Davis, encouraged me to do grad school, which obviously as a Truman student you know that Truman prides itself on the amount of students who go on to masters degrees and Ph.D.s. It had never occurred to me before, but I joined the Ronald E. McNair program, which also encourages students to do research and get research published, which will help you with grad school. And doing that I basically applied to a couple of schools, two of which were focused in creative writing, which is what my major was and my focus was at Truman. And then two of which were screenwriting. The No. 1 choice that I had was University of Southern California, and I got in, so that brought me out to Los Angeles in fall of 2004. My last semester at USC, I got into the CBS writer's mentoring workshop and that helped me get my foot in the door because my mentor actually got me my first job as a research assistant on the CBS show "Jericho."



Submitted Photo
Truman alumna Akela Cooper said she loves to write for genre television and will be talking about folklore and screenwriting on Friday.

KS: Do you have any advice for anyone who is wanting to write for television?

AC: The advice I have is to be prepared to start at the bottom and work your way up. Entry-level jobs, which is basically the staff writer position, [are] becoming harder for people to break into. You have to be willing to do the research assistant jobs, the writer's assistant jobs, script coordinator, production assistant, which is commonly known as a PA. And also doing your own writing, and also looking into the writing programs. I was a part of two — CBS was the first one and about two years later I ran into the Warner Bros. workshop which is actually a program that helped me land my first staffing job. So more and more of the writing programs are how people are getting their foot in the door.

KS: What is it like working on a television show?

AC: So far for me it's actually been a lot of fun. You're basically spending your 8-hour work day, sometimes 10-hour work day, in a room full of very smart, very creative people, and not to mention most of the time you get a free lunch, so that's a perk. Basically you are paid to help with stories for these characters and for these shows, and I wouldn't want to be doing anything else, quite frankly. I'm happy where I am and I've been able to actually make a living doing what I love. Spending time in these rooms with these people, you're making friendships, you're forming bonds. It's actually one of the best things I could think of to do. When I went to USC, initially it was for features ... just from the television writing classes that I took at USC, I didn't realize how a television staff worked or how television worked, really, until I got there. So it was eye opening that instead of toiling away in obscurity for years on end until you sell your first feature, you could actually be a writer, making a living, and seeing your product on screen months after you write it instead of years. I love television, it's what I want to do. Hopefully someday I will have my own show.

KS: As a writer for a television show, do you get to spend any time on set?

AC: Two of the shows that I've worked for, "Grimm" on NBC and "The 100" on The CW, they send writers to set. You get production experience for most shows now, I think. They prefer to have writers on set. It's really important, especially in helping the showrunner keep their vision and keep the show on target, especially if the actors have questions or something's not working, to have someone there to be able to fix it immediately instead of having to go back and forth.

KS: Any specific characters on "The 100" or "Grimm" you enjoy writing about?

AC: This may seem like a cop-out, but typically I enjoy just writing everyone, especially how they interact. On "Grimm," I was partial to Sgt. Wu, but that's because he's just fun. Usually — I don't know if you've seen the show — but he has the sarcasm and the one-liners. Also, the character of Monroe was a lot of fun to write for in that same vein, they were just, you know, I don't want to say our lead was brooding, but he was kind of brooding, so whenever we could stick humor in there, that was always a plus and something we enjoy. And that goes for "The 100," as well. It's a very serious, dark, post-apocalyptic show, so whenever we can inject humor in there, we thought that was a great accomplishment. "Witches of East End" is a big ensemble show, so there's a lot of characters where you just enjoy the different pairings, and the different dynamics that all of the actors bring to those pairings and seeing how they work. So it's kind of fun, especially if you're on a show that goes multiple seasons, to put characters together who haven't worked together. Season two of "The 100" we had a character named Jaha and a character named Murphy who actually met for the first time in my episode in season two and both of those actors are great. It was a dynamic we hadn't actually explored yet because the character Jaha was actually responsible for killing Murphy's father when they were still on the Ark and just exploring all those tensions and figuring out realistic ways the character of Murphy would come around to respect and follow Jaha, so that was a lot of fun. Looking for those little moments between the actors and characters can be a lot of fun, especially when you realize what you thought was going to click actually clicks.

KS: You mentioned all these shows you write for, and they all seem to have a supernatural/sci-fi element to them. And I know "The 100" is on The CW, which is sort of known for its genre television, so I was wondering how you feel about genre television and those fantasy elements, and what place you think it has in television, especially with other bigger shows it competes with, like "Breaking Bad" or "Mad Men" sort of the shows that are grounded in reality and are popular.

AC: I think genre itself is really popular. Like the biggest show on TV right now is "Game of Thrones." Everybody is looking for their own "Game of Thrones." I love genre. I was born and raised a sci-fi nerd. Both my parents were heavily into genre. We watched "Star Trek: The Next Generation," "Babylon 5," "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine," "seaQuest," "Farscape," "Battlestar Galatica," "The X-Files." That was my bread and butter growing up, so I love working in genre television. It actually might be difficult for me to write for something like "Law & Order: SVU," that's kind of not my wheelhouse, although "Grimm" had a little bit of the cop procedural itself. But I love genre. If I never work in anything outside of genre, I wouldn't be sad, honestly. If I could continue making a living writing for genre, I'll do it and I'll be happy to do it.

"She Kills Monsters," about nerds, for nerds

BY LAURA SEAMAN
TMN Reporter

"She Kills Monsters" loudly and proudly announced that the nerds of the world have come out of their shells and are here to stay. The play serves as a huge statement about modern nerd culture as well as other social issues such as bullying and sexuality.

After her parents and younger sister were killed in a car accident, main character Agnes dives into the world of Dungeons & Dragons in an attempt to better understand the sibling she barely knew. Her deceased younger sister Tilly was a nerdy girl, and that's about all Agnes knew. But with the help of Tilly's friend Chuck, she is about to discover an entire fantasy world full of secrets.

The audience joins Agnes as she uncovers her sister's secrets one by one, finding out that Tilly was a closeted lesbian who disliked Agnes' boyfriend and was bullied in school. All of these memories and feelings are portrayed through fantasy characters, daring rescues and, of course, monsters.

The play takes place during the 1990s when nerd culture still was deemed "weird" and any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality socially was unacceptable. Watching this play made me realize how much society has changed throughout the years. Nowadays, completely it is normal to geek-out about something or to know someone who is part of the LGBTQ community. However, the message of this play can be applied to more than just these situations.

If I had to choose one word to describe the exact message of "She Kills Monsters," it would be acceptance. At the beginning of the play, Agnes is an average adult in every way. She does nothing out of the ordinary, has a ho-hum boyfriend and has no knowledge of the nerdy world of Dungeons & Dragons. If it weren't for the death of her younger sister, Agnes might have remained average her whole life. Instead, she branches out, learns to accept new things and accepts the weirdness in herself.

Life for Agnes becomes much more exciting, and she becomes a happier person after tossing aside her hesitations and immersing herself in the world of Dungeons & Dragons. Anybody can be like Agnes if they learn to live their lives without judgment and become open to new experiences. On the other hand, someone could be like the bullies in the play, and be close-minded and hateful toward people who are not like them.

"If I had to choose one word to describe the exact message of 'She Kills Monsters,' it would be acceptance."
— Junior Laura Seaman

I think anybody could learn a valuable lesson from this play, whether it's about sexuality, acceptance or nerd culture. I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and the production was incredible.

The actors in this play had to be funny, emotional and skilled at fighting all in one. The Truman State students in this production were successful in all of those areas. These talented actors made the audience laugh with their witty comments and skilled choreography. One particularly smart and humorous touch was the use of the ensemble for comedic relief as they lifted actors during fights and participated in dance battles.

The best fight in the play was probably the one that included Tiamat, the five-headed dragon. Tiamat's entrance was breathtaking as the wall opened up to reveal a fiery glow and five floating heads with glowing red eyes, each one held by a member of the ensemble. The music was hardcore and the fight was intense.

The production's music and set also were incredible, as classic songs such as "Loser" and "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)" emphasized the fight scenes and brought a feeling of familiarity to the fantasy world. The sword fights almost seemed like a dance when paired with the music, and it was enchanting. The monsters featured in these fights were just as incredible, and it was clear that hours of work were put into the costumes.

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