



Photographs by  
Debra DiPoalo

# THE NAKED AND THE DAMNED

Anne Rice's  
prayer for  
the living

BY HELEN KNODE

It isn't particularly warm outdoors on this autumn day three blocks from the ocean, but inside Santa Monica's Change of Hobbit bookstore we are sweltering. People have been arriving since morning for Anne Rice's 2 o'clock book signing; by early afternoon the huge line winds and twists its way tightly through the store like miles of intestine compressed into a human torso. Everybody carries at least one copy of Rice's latest book, *The Witching Hour*—some have four or five in a shopping sack—and everybody has several of her other works under their arms or bulging out of purses: chewed-up paperbacks, pristine hardcover editions, rare bound galleys. There is a covertly fetishistic aspect to this whole event. Books outnumber people more than 3 to 1, assuming an almost magical separate presence, pulsing with a life and need of their own as though humans existed to serve them rather than the other way around. Or maybe I just have this fantasy because these are Anne Rice's novels—supernatural, highly erotic, unforgettable.

There's a brief smattering of applause as the author arrives and everyone at the front of the line gets to their feet. She smiles and waves a bit, a petite woman in large eyeglasses and long, straight beatnik hair, raven-dark and cut in bangs. Her audience has grown and transformed enormously since she published her first book, *Interview With the Vampire*, in 1976. Gay men predominated initially because of her lushly homoerotic themes; with the publication of *The Vampire Lestat* in 1985, she caught on among a teenage heavy-metal crowd who would come to her signings dressed as the bloodsucking, iconoclastic rock star Lestat. This Sunday afternoon, there's one man wrapped in white bandages—*The Mummy* was published in 1989—and a few in black

leather and skull earrings, but Rice's phenomenal popularity has spread far beyond specific groups to grip the public at large. (According to *The New York Times*, sales of Rice's paperbacks last year totaled 1.3 million—one book every 24 seconds.) Waiting patiently in line are men and women in equal numbers, young kids and older people, readers of romance and pornography, horror/sci-fi aficionados, people who care exclusively about vampires, people who don't like any vampires but hers, gay women who appreciate Rice's sexual tolerance and straight men who get into her depictions of male masochism. The only homogeneous factor about this crowd, it seems, is that most everybody is white.

Anne Rice arranges herself in a throne-like red-velvet chair, smiling, unperturbed by the heat and crowd. As the line moves sluggishly forward, the store owner reminds everyone that Rice will sign only three books per customer and write personal dedications only in *The Witching Hour*. The author tries to meet everybody's eyes, answering all sorts of questions—"Who should play Lestat in the movie?" (Rice would like Rutger Hauer) or "When will you write a *Mummy* sequel?" (Rice says not for a while)—and accepting

many bouquets of red roses. Crammed in front of the autographing table are two hot lamps and a video crew from Knopf, Rice's publisher, taping the signing for their sales conference. A PR woman with a microphone roams the store, pulling people out of line to interview them; she concentrates on the gloom-rockers, swathed in noir with pale makeup, dyed hair and ripped jeans. A girl and two guys move self-consciously to the camera and explain why Lestat is their favorite character. The girl looks directly into the lens and says fervently, "We love you, Anne Rice."

"I've never been able to read philosophy," says Rice, sitting on the quiet, sun-drenched side porch of her wondrous New Orleans antebellum house, surrounded on every side by towering banana trees and other humid green things. Drinking a Tab, leaning back in a wicker chair, still wearing her high-top black sneakers from her morning walk around the Garden District, Rice throws herself into questions of philosophy with humor and startling tenacity—as though the meaning of life and death were a matter of life and death.

"I remember back in the very early '60s trying to understand existentialism. I read chapters in the Pocket Guide on Heidegger and Kierkegaard, but really couldn't understand it. I see my work as functioning for people like myself who are not able to get philosophy theoretically in an essay. On the