

other hand, my books obviously mean something to people who are able to understand theory because critics have related them to Nietzsche, although I've never read Nietzsche. From the earliest time, the characters in whatever I was writing would open their mouths and start talking about good and evil or why we're here."

After 12 novels — novels that keep getting more complicated and risky — it's obvious that Rice is driven by some irresistible force to tackle the biggest mysteries of the cosmos, a monumental project the exact scope of which hasn't yet become clear even to her. "I really do feel like I've just started," she says, "and the supernatural novel is the framework I want to use without apology." Rice calls the force pushing her "a lusty spiritual ambition," a sexy, happy-sounding phrase. But as everyone who has written about Rice has noticed, she is haunted by a great deal of pain and loss.

Now 49 years old, Rice grew up "lace-curtain Irish" in New Orleans, on the outskirts of the wealthy Garden District where she lives today. The hero in *The Witching Hour*, Michael Curry, also Irish and also from New Orleans, is the closest Rice has come to dramatizing her origins and cultural milieu. She describes her childhood cryptically as "horrifically weird"; over the years, sketchy details have emerged. Christened Howard Allen O'Brien at birth after her father, she changed her name to Anne when she was 6. Her mother was a devout Catholic who drank herself to death when Anne was 15. Shaped by unspoken, perhaps unconscious sorrows, Anne Rice's childhood was overpoweringly religious and virtually motherless — a vivid, uncivilized fantasy life serving as her only comfort and escape, out of which she wrote morbid tales about aliens who land on Earth and then kill themselves.

Katherine Ramsland, a philosophy professor at Rutgers and author of *Prism of the Night*, the first full-length book on Rice, due out in 1991, lists four events that had a major impact on Rice: her mother's premature death; her loss of faith three years later at age 18; the move from New Orleans to Texas where she met her husband, Stan Rice, and then to San Francisco where she lived for 27 years; and the death of her 5-year-old daughter in 1972 of leukemia. (I could add a fifth: the adult child of an alcoholic, Rice drank heavily for many years herself, quitting for good in 1979 because of her young son, Chris, now 12.) Her daughter's death precipitated the acute existential and metaphysical anguish that eventually produced *Interview With the Vampire*.

Anne Rice is a bohemian intellectual, someone who seems to have argued philosophy and politics in cafés and at dinner parties her entire grown-up life. (She'll often say, "In the '60s and '70s, we used to argue about such-and-such," the such-and-such being the American presence in Vietnam or whether men's bodies are beautiful or whether people can live meaningful lives without religion.) She certainly resembles a latter-day bohemian on her sunnyporch in New Orleans with her early-Cher hair, a purple turtleneck and the rest of her covered in basic black. Her mind is wild and audacious. She has a master's degree in creative writing, and spent a lot of time around universities when her husband, Stan, a poet and a painter, taught at San Francisco State. Though unable to read philosophy, she'll refer to a lecture she once heard on the German word *Entsagung*, which explains the liberated feeling her hardcore porn characters get in the midst of the worst humiliations, or something a brilliant Chaucer professor once said about secular salvation, or a passage in Henri Bergson that captures an idea she's trying to get at about how, without the physical body as an anchor, the spirit and mind would just drift aimlessly. But the academic in Anne Rice doesn't run her show; it just keeps her in touch with the Western tradition of Great Ideas even as her naked heroines are thrown over the knees of lowly scullery maids and paddled mercilessly. She's an adventurer and original philosopher with little concern for precedents or what is safe. As one fan at the Change of Hobbit signing said, "Here's someone who goes out into the darkness and explores it and illuminates it for us."

On the broadest thematic level, Rice's stories are about outsiders, people on the periphery of ordinary conventional society with its strict rules and categories: vampires aren't exactly dead or alive; the free people of color in her second novel, *The Feast of All Saints* (1979), aren't black or white; the castrati of *Cry to Heaven* (1982) aren't quite men or women; the young heroine of Rice's pseudonymously written erotic novel, *Belinda* (1986), is neither child nor adult. In her three-novel *Sleeping Beauty* series (1983-85), also written under a pseudonym, the characters are polysexual — or is it metasexual? The author confesses to feeling like an outsider, feeling estranged from her own life, from America and the American present, which explains in part her frequent use of historical settings. (Her most extreme so far has been her trip back 6,000 years to the Middle East in *Queen of the Damned* [1988], seeking the genesis of the nasty bloodsucking spirit Amel.) "Growing up in an all Irish-Catholic neighborhood, growing up in this city full of haunted houses where history is alive, where history moves through the streets and people think in terms of one or two hundred years when they talk about their families — the historical framework was just easier [to work in]."

There's another way to look at Rice's outsiders, however: as the most inside of insiders. Not just lurking on the shadowy fringes of life and death, the vampire resides at the intersection of life, death and undeath — a creature, in other words, whose very existence demonstrates that life is not separate

from death, that the two penetrate each other in uncanny and mysterious ways. It's impossible, therefore, to draw a firm line between two states of being that are usually regarded as distinct and irreconcilable. And because her vampires have a flexible and joyous carnal appetite — bloodsucking is not only as sublime as sex, it is sex — Rice explodes another familiar equation, that sex equals death. Sex is death and it is life, too. "To me," Rice says, "a vampire is a tragic figure, someone compelled to do evil when they really would rather not. He gets outside of life and sees the absolute beauty of life and yet has to kill to survive. I think of that as a powerful, powerful metaphor for the compromises we make every day in our lives."

I tried the "insider" idea on Rice, uncertain how she'd react to a challenge to one of the major interpretations of both the meaning and popular appeal of her work. "I think that's a very interesting distinction," she said, considering the question with the kind of fierce thoughtfulness she seems to live by. "I see my characters as outsiders in the sense that they are able to perceive better what the inside is... because they are outcasts. They all have a longing to be inside." The theme of the outsider, of course, is a highly

respected, much-used theme of this century; but inverting Rice's outsiders to insiders makes them much more subversive than just misfits or moral criminals. It makes them symbols of the collapse of all categories and dualities — dead versus alive, man versus woman, white versus black, homosexual versus heterosexual, matter versus spirit — a collapse that has led to pervasive confusion and anxiety, and futile attempts by the West, such as Nazism and religious fundamentalism, to reinstate the old order. Although Rice writes in an old-fashioned, pre-modern tradition of the popular philosophical novel, à la Dickens or Tolstoy, and although she often sets her stories in the past, she is addressing what we fondly call "the modern condition": a world with no axis or center, everything flying apart at the seams, opposites crumbling into one another — the individual shoved into the abyss to create his or her own meanings, to put the world back together again.

Rice's biographer, Katherine Ramsland, situates the author squarely in two of America's major cultural currents of the 1970s: the sexual revolution and the search for spiritual truths. In substantially revising the vampire legend — Rice's aren't cowed by garlic or crucifixes, do not have truck with Satan, and try to live normal lives in hotel rooms and palatial homes — Rice has, in Ramsland's view, joined ranks with many others questioning institutionalized

