

wisdom essentially proceeds from a respect for the physical. When you lose that and go for the pure idea or religious idea, whether it's Nazism or Marxism or whatever, you betray the flesh because you betray compassion for the individual."

As she talked, intense as usual, I suddenly realized how unlikely it is that Anne Rice has become a famous author, well-read, well-respected, well-paid and loved avidly by millions of fans. "You can feel her characters," a woman at Change of Hobbit said. "You can feel what she writes down to your bones," added a male fan.

But you can't really lump her in with any school or type of fiction. She isn't a part of what she calls "the Boys' Club of Horror" (Stephen King, Clive Barker, Peter Straub). She isn't like Robert Ludlum or Danielle Steele, who rely on formula for their consistent appeal: Rice returns to her characters but not to plot formulas. And because she writes genre fiction, she isn't lumped in with the prominent writers of "serious" fiction like Toni Morrison or John Updike or numbered among the temporarily prominent writers of middle-class manners — "the stepchildren of Henry James," Rice calls them — of

which there are so many every publishing season. "You can't mistake certain kinds of novels for anything but serious novels," she says, "because they don't function in any other way. They're not entertaining. They don't have great characters. They're not even memorable. They are truly serious fiction — that's all they can be."

But Rice is definitely entrenched in this cultural moment. Her work reflects, presides over, benefits from and is trying to make sense of the breakdown of categories — social, psychological, spiritual — that marks American society at this

point in history. She's also struggling to see beyond this moment to a future of more clarity built on higher ethical truths. Her career, in a sense, has suffered from the confusions of the present: critics can't decide if she's a pop writer or a serious one when she is both, reconciling popular and serious fiction in a way that hasn't been done with such spectacular commercial success in the literary realm since mass art broke away from high art in the 19th century. Katherine Ramsland says, "No one else in the country who sells like she does is as philosophically serious."

Rice's lusty spiritual ambition animates her storytelling and her inquisitiveness. She throws her body, mind, heart and soul into everything she writes, and you get the strong sense from her books that here is a writer working out her destiny with diligence, saving herself. Anne Rice is doing what her protagonists do, and what her readers are doing: fumbling, hacking, driving, *writing*, through the confusion of her times, putting things back together in different patterns, guided by the wisdom connected with the lessons of her flesh.

Proof that Rice is moving toward her own center is her latest book, *The Witching Hour*, the first novel she has written since her return to New Orleans two years ago. It is the story of a dynasty of women, the Mayfair Witches, stretching back to 17th-century France and Scotland, who've allied themselves with a powerful spirit called Lasher. Lasher is both a demon lover and a demon investment banker: he makes the witches rich and can satisfy them sexually although he has no corporeal body. The modern Mayfairs live in the Garden District in New Orleans, in a violet-colored house with dark-green shutters that was built in the late 1850s. They live, in other words, in Anne Rice's house. Deirdre Mayfair wasted away on the porch where we did our interview. Antha Mayfair flung herself out of the third-story window over our heads onto the paving stones that I could see from where I was sitting. "There's no question," says Rice, "that I've had this very strange experience in the past two years of having my life become my art. This is the house I was always writing about. It could have been Lestat's house. Now I live in it."

This huge, sturdy, exotically landscaped house is the inside of Anne Rice's head, outside. It is her novels in the form of mortar, plaster and wood; her lusty ambition and baroque imagination realized in architecture: it is her body. But once at home, Rice is restless again, moving beyond her signature themes toward a new one — the supernatural, the world of spirits. Rice touched directly on this in *Queen of the Damned* in the figure of Amel, a free-floating spirit who gradually assumes a personality as he serves two ancient witches, Maharet and Mekare; he wants a body, badly, and he does a terrible thing to get one. *The Witching Hour* continues to explore the idea of a spirit in search of an incarnation as, over the centuries, Lasher accrues enough power to make himself visible and tangible to the Mayfairs. Rice says she's currently working on two novels, something called *In the Frankenstein Tradition* and the fourth in the vampire series. They will no doubt take her readers into even more terrifying and far-flung territory as she forges fearlessly ahead. "I want to deal with this question in the next book and the next: What are these creatures? They are a metaphor for me of the whole central question of what life is." 