

SHADOWS AND LIGHT

A CONVERSATION WITH



BY MIKE MORRELL

IT BEGAN LIKE A BAD JOKE. A priest, a rabbi, a Baptist preacher—and Anne Rice—walk into a church in Birmingham, Ala. But here's the punch line: It really happened. It's all part of the energetic new direction of the former queen of gothic horror: drawing shadows and shedding light around the greatest outsider of them all.

Anne Rice is the 136 million-copy author of more than two decades' worth of macabre novels, circling around the world of witches, vampires and others on the fringe. She is perhaps best known for the 1994 film adaptation *Interview with a Vampire* starring Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise.

Rice quietly became a Christian in the late 1990s, returning to the Catholic church of her childhood. In 2002, she began work on an ambitious historical fiction series exploring Jesus and His earliest followers, to the shock of many long-time readers and fans, and she's drawing curious friends from across denominational and cultural divides. *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* was released in November 2005 and is the first novel of the series.

became absolutely the only thing I wanted to write—the life of Christ.”

A seemingly far journey from vampires, I thought. What did she think of her old books? “The truth is, I’ve found what those characters were looking for,” she confessed happily to the audience of 400 in the sanctuary that evening. “I can’t continue those stories because they don’t work for me anymore. The vampires are not metaphors for the outsider for me, because I don’t feel like an outsider anymore. I feel like I’m included in a great big wonderful family.”

LEAVING HOME

Rice was raised in a Catholic home in the 1940s and 1950s. She explains that in her large Irish family, everything they did was colored by their faith. For young Rice, living in that atmosphere helped give life a sense of meaning, purpose and blessing.

When she turned 18, Rice began to leave that world. When she started college, she lost her faith for various reasons.

“I don’t know if that could have been any different now; what I was conscious of is I wanted to know the modern world,” she says.

could be redeemed.”

Though she says she never actually engaged in occult practices or even believed in them, she saw her dark creations as “true” in a metaphorical sense. “I took the vampire as a total reality, and asked: ‘What’s it like to live this life of darkness, to feel cut off from God, to be so close to humans that when you embrace them, you take their life?’”

CALL OF ANCIENT STORIES

When I acquired *Christ the Lord*, one of the first things I did was flip to the back, where Rice writes an extensive afterword detailing her research process for the series. I was impressed; she read enough biblical and historical scholarship to give a seminary student an inferiority complex. This fastidious attention to detail presented me with a very different picture of Rice than the one of my fanciful earlier imaginings.

If séances were allegedly her stock in trade before, couldn’t her faith in Jesus have arrived in some Paul-on-the-Damascus-road experience? So as I sat across from her, I had

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Rice and I spoke before the main event that night in Birmingham. When we sat down in the pastor’s study, Rice was flanked by a hastily assembled entourage: her publicist, assistants, a Franciscan monk named Beckett and a trio of local friends.

It wasn’t difficult to lose my surroundings. Rice is petite but with a strong sense of presence. She was radiant, quietly articulating her new literary direction to me. Contrary to some erroneous reports, Rice did not return to faith in Christ because of personal health complications or because of the death of her husband, Stan, in 2002. Her nudges toward spiritual awakening occurred before these incidents and remained the guiding light in her writing.

“It became a total obsession,” Rice says. “It

“I wanted to read existential philosophers. I wanted to learn the grammar of the modern world.”

Her upbringing began to feel limited and parochial compared to the new relationships she was forming. Rice believes that growing up meant she had to face the reality that there was no God and no meaning to the universe, but she was left with a consuming grief for the faith of her childhood.

This loss of a sense of God, combined with personal tragedy, propelled her to write. “I never stopped a search for meaning,” she says. “And when I began to write books, they were dark books because they were about heroes and heroines who were searching for something of value in life, some kind of context for themselves through which they

to ask: What drew her to faith? Was she a mystic or a historian?

She looked me in the eye. “Well, it certainly has to be personal experience, but I did read myself back into faith. It was history, reading the story of the Jews in time and realizing that there was no rational explanation for the survival of the Jewish people. It was the biggest mystery history ever offered me—how did these people survive? That was the beginning. And then the second big mystery was this: How in the world did Christianity spread the way it did, to become an international religion by A.D. 110? How did that happen? In trying to answer those two questions, I read myself back into belief. And then belief came.”

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MIDRASH AS ART

At the meeting in Birmingham, a Jewish rabbi said that *Christ the Lord* was merely a piece of what his people call *Midrash*. “*Midrash* is the playfulness—and I say this in a loving way—with which the rabbis embraced biblical texts, filled in some of the blanks and missing pieces, and tried to seek God through the stories they told. The Bible itself is a very sparse account, and it needs us to be able to read it and make it come alive for us—it requires an imagination. I think what you’ve done with the Christian Scripture is something Jewish; you’ve filled in the pieces with *Midrash*. I didn’t know that Christians were allowed to do that,” he said as the audience laughed.

What is art, and how can people of faith go about creating art that honors every aspect of who they are? Rice has no problem making her expression of faith in art overt, as her latest offering readily attests. “I think good Christian art has always tried to bring people closer to God,” she says.

Father Ray Dunmyer told Rice that he thinks that plunging oneself into God is a

catalyst for authentic creativity. “In terms of writing your novel, it must have been a wonderful religious experience for you—putting yourself into the shoes of Jesus, walking with Christ and having that sense of being one with Him, which I think is the call of every Christian.”

“It certainly made me ask a lot of questions about my faith,” Rice chimed in. “I originally thought when I started to write this that I wouldn’t have to take a stand on any matter of faith. Then I realized that I couldn’t write half a page without taking a stand on everything! It forced me to a very great conclusion, spiritually. All Christian art does this in a way; you draw really close to your subject matter—you have to. Otherwise, you’re not going to have Christian art.”

She continued, stating plainly that her writing was indeed a spiritual experience for her. “I didn’t know what I was getting into. When you start a book, I think you should leave room to be surprised by a lot of things that are going to happen along the way. As I got deeper and deeper into it, I was united in a way I have never been as a person. Religiously, creatively, spiritually, materially

... every way. I’m in awe of this feeling of unity, of this lack of any kind of conflict. And it is a great, great adventure.”

A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIAN?

Many readers of all faiths are surprised by how faithful her book is to biblical accounts of Jesus. It would be easy to assume, based on this, that she’s a thoroughly conservative Christian. But here is where an element of paradox enters.

“I want to love all the children of God,” she said in a recent interview with her publisher. “Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist—everyone. I want to love gay Christians and straight Christians.”

Because of these twin confessions, Rice has gained the reputation of being both historically rooted and generously inclusive in her Christian faith. When we had a moment alone—just Rice and the entourage—I had to ask her: “Do you feel like there is any tension between following the Jesus revealed in the Bible and embracing people from many religions and lifestyles?”

“I don’t think there’s any tension here,” she replied without hesitation. “I think that’s what Christ told us to do—to love everybody. Jesus said, ‘Go teach all nations’; He didn’t say, ‘Go teach certain people.’ He put out His arms to the whole world.”

Ever since the 2004 elections, I have observed the phenomenon of Christians who are difficult to pigeonhole, people who are committed to Christ but color outside the lines. So where does Rice fall? Are there any boxes that she would place herself in?

“I’m a Democrat and a liberal. But a very conservative Catholic. But a liberal Catholic too ... a radical Catholic.” How perfectly Ricean.

“When you look at Christianity as it’s believed and practiced in America today,” I ask her, “is there anything that concerns you?”

“Oh, you must be kidding,” she shoots back. This breaks the entourage’s code of silence, as they can’t help but laugh. “Well, I think the thing that concerns me more than anything else is that so many people associate us with hatred and intolerance. They don’t think of us as people who know

how to love, and that is tragic. We need to do something to change their opinion.”

She continued, building her hope into a crescendo. At this moment, Anne Rice strikes me as a walking anachronism, a Victorian-lace preacher forged in the twin fires of the first and the 21st centuries. She generates more light than heat, and her enthusiasm is contagious:

“We need to stop being so afraid that the devil is winning. The devil’s not winning—we are winning. Jesus is winning. God is winning. We have the strength and the time to open our arms to absolutely everyone. Rushing to judgment, condemning whole classes and groups of people—that is not in the spirit of Christ that I see in the Gospel. I can’t find that spirit. I see the spirit of love, taking the message to absolutely everyone.” 🌹

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