



Coming Home to Jesus

Author Anne Rice on her journey from an *Interview with the Vampire* to *Christ the Lord*

BOB SMIETANA

For years Anne Rice was, in her own words, an unhappy atheist. So, in the early 1990s, Rice, the best-selling author of *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Vampire Lestat*, *Blood Canticle*, and more than twenty other novels, many of them dealing with the supernatural, went looking for God. The search took Rice from the Holy Land, where she visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and ate fish caught in the Sea of Galilee, to the top of Corcovado Mountain in Rio de Janeiro, where she stood at the feet of the majestic statue of Christ the Redeemer and watched in awe as the clouds formed and broke around that statue.

But Rice didn't find God in the Holy Land or on the mountaintop in Brazil. Instead, she found God where she had left him nearly forty years earlier—at the celebration of Holy Communion at her parish church.

Her priest, after hearing Rice's two-hour confession, welcomed her back into the church with one request—that Rice and her husband, Stan, be married in the church. They had been married more than three decades earlier in a civil ceremony.

"I thought at first that my husband would be angry," Rice says, "that he'd say, 'Listen, we've been married longer than almost anybody we know, and you are asking me to come and get married again?' But he did not do that. He stood there before that altar and he said the words to me with great feeling, and that was a beautiful thing. He was an atheist, but I think he recognized how important it was to me."

For a time, Rice continued writing her vampire novels. But something didn't seem right with the books. In 2002, she started work on a new project—a first-person, multi-volume biography of Jesus. She thought the project would mean the end of her literary career, but was pleasantly surprised when *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* became a bestseller after its release last November and received both critical and popular acclaim. *Companion* features editor Bob Smietana spoke with Rice from her home in San Diego.

You said in an interview that you were afraid to write this book about Jesus. Why is that?

I was frightened because it was the most difficult thing I ever did. It was the most daunting and intense combination of research and imagination. I have never researched something as thoroughly as this book, and it was never so important that every single detail be as accurate as I could make it.

I had always had more freedom in my other books. If I didn't want to research a particular building in the sixteenth century, I could make up a

building. But here I was dealing with real places—Nazareth, Jerusalem, the Temple, Alexandria—and it was terribly important to me to get them exactly right. That meant an enormous amount of research into geography, archeology, social sciences, and studies of the culture and family life in the first century.

The other challenge was the act of imagination needed to put the characters into motion and keep them spontaneous and alive and individual and have them speaking to each other and to have things flowing. That's the task of the novelist with any book. It's just that this was made much more difficult because I was writing about Jesus Christ. I believe in him and I believe he is God. I believe God made the world. I believe he emptied himself of his omniscience in order to come down and experience things as a human for our sakes.

Some reporters describe you as a prodigal coming home, or as "the Queen of Darkness" who saw the light. How do you characterize this book and this time of your life?

My previous work reflected a long journey to God. After the loss of my faith when I was nineteen, I experienced profound sadness and sense of being an outcast. My books reflected that. When I hit on the vampire as a character, he was a classic outsider, a loner, a monster mourning for the light. My vampires were very conscience-stricken and filled with grief. They were always looking for some kind of context where they could make their lives meaningful. They were looking for redemption—and [through them] I was looking for redemption. The only transcendence I could find was in those books—in writing about the search for redemption.

How did your return to faith affect your writing?

What happened was that belief came

back. It's very hard to explain what that means because it is so simple and so profound. I experienced a firm belief in God, and also felt an enormous love for him, a great desire to talk to him, to be with him, to go back to church, to go back to Mass and communion. So I went back to my church.

Three years later, I was still writing vampire novels, and they were becoming more intensely religious. But they were an awkward fit—the metaphor didn't work anymore. I wasn't one of

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them anymore. Finally, I was sitting in church and decided to commit my work to Christ—that I would not write anything that was out of kilter in any way with my conversion.

How has your faith helped you in the difficulties of the past few years, especially the death of your husband?

My faith gave me great strength. I certainly experienced tremendous strength, tremendous assurance that God was with my husband and he was going to take care of him. That he was going to go into the light with God. I felt that very strongly.

I never take a tragedy personally. When my mother died when I was fourteen I didn't take it personally—I don't know what people mean when they say, "How could God do this to me?" God runs the whole universe and everything happens for a purpose. That was clear to me even when I was fourteen.

There was obviously a huge emotional impact in losing my mother. It was the same when my daughter died—it was absolutely devastating—it was one of the cruelest things that can happen, the cruelty of fate to that child, to the parents, but it's not personal.

Everybody dies. It's hard to realize

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but that is really true. Death isn't an isolated thing that happens to some of us because we are bad. It happens to everyone. I have been blessed in being able to understand that.

God is with us no matter what happens. I am confident that God is with us and God is with everybody—he is with the victim of the accident as well as the one who gets saved. He is with the person who is killed by the serial killer as well as the woman who talks the serial killer into turning himself in. He is there. When you get a glimpse

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What has been the reaction to your book?

The response has been overwhelmingly intense. People are immensely more interested in this than I thought they would be. I thought that they would dismiss the book. I thought the hardest thing I would be up against would be indifference. But people do not dismiss it—they take it seriously. It has gotten more attention than any book I have written in years. Probably ever. I don't think I have ever gotten this much attention for a book.

One of the things you've mentioned in other interviews is that many people you've met have been interested in talking about God but are turned off by the church because the word "Christian" has a number of bad connotations.

We Christians have lost our credibility as people who love. We have lost it. It is a tragic thing. We are perceived by many

conscientious secular people as people who hate, people who are intolerant, and people who want to impose our views on others, and this is tragic. We have to get our reputation back—we have to put out our arms and tell people that we love them. That is the prime command—to love and to serve.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 25: "When I was hungry you gave me to eat, when I was thirsty you gave me to drink, when I was in prison you visited me"—this is the work that we have before us. It is not going around

condemning people and driving people away from churches and telling people that they are not good enough. That's not what Jesus

wants us to do. I think it's terribly important that we focus on how to love and how to give.

I have found, all over the country during [the book] tour, that a lot of Christians are doing that. On the pew level, on the level of the local church, there is great acceptance of all kinds of people, and the congregations I have seen while traveling have been vigorous ones, where people come together each week and they really care about praying together and trying together to figure out what they should do. It's been very inspiring.

You've said we need more saints.

We do. I hope we will see more and more leaders stepping up and speaking up for Christianity and for love. An outstanding example is Rick Warren, who wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*. I dismissed that book when it first came out—I thought, here I am surrounded by biblical research and someone is giving me this self-help book—how outrageous. Then I sat down and read the book and it is amazing—written in the most pristine, simple language and telling you what the transformation is that God expects from you as a Christian.

I think we need more people to come out like Rick Warren has and promote love and tolerance—and don't devote all your space to beating some group over the head. Do what Rick Warren does—open your arms.

Who opened their arms to you and helped you come back to the church?

I went around for about a year, asking people questions. I remember asking this good friend, John Ramirez, who is very much of an observant Catholic, "How am I going to go back to a church that thinks my son is going to hell because he is gay?" John thought about it for a minute. Then he shrugged and said, "Our God is an all-merciful God."

Those words, I could swear to you, practically turned the dial for me. I looked at him and said, "Of course."

Last week, I was reading the Gospel of Matthew and came to the place where Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than it is for a rich man to be saved. The apostles ask Jesus, "Well, who can be saved?"

Jesus says that all things are possible with God. Of course. What it means to me is, all of these social issues will work out. God is not going to let someone go to hell by mistake. He's not going to let a good kid go to hell because he is gay. That is not going to happen. God is going to work it out. We can't hope to know how.

There was a time that the church had spoken on African slavery—in favor of it. There was a time when the church had spoken on the subjugation of women, in favor of it. There was a time when the church said nobody could get divorced, come hell or high water, and now we have Catholics getting annulments fairly routinely. When I was a child, you weren't allowed to speak to a divorced Catholic. We *shunned* them—that was the word.

I do not think everything is relative—this is a difficult question always—I am

still a bit confused about how people can get divorced and remarried when you have the words so plainly in Matthew that you can't. I don't quite understand that but I trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding the church and that it is understandable. And I trust Bishop N.T. Wright when he says there are grounds in Scripture for divorce.

A few months ago, N.T. Wright spoke about the importance of Christian imagination. Do you have some thoughts on how to integrate imagination and spirituality?

From early childhood, we were encouraged to meditate on the life of Christ and imagine what it was like for him, what it was like for him to die on the cross—what he suffered, what he went through. So [combining spirituality and imagination] is a very natural thing for me to do.

I think imagination helps us understand the incarnation. Jesus came to us and was a human, we can approach him through that humanity—because the divine God is truly unknowable. So we have this incredible shattering mystery of the incarnation. This seems to say something profound about the nature of the divine God. If the human Christ was also there from the beginning, part of the blessed Trinity, maker of the world—what does that mean about humanity? What does that mean about us in relation to God? I think the relationship is infinitely more intimate than we think between humans and God. And we have a God in heaven right now, who is human. That is an amazing thing. I think imagination is the way we ponder that, discover that, understand that mystery. We understand what we can imagine.

You are planning to do a whole life of Jesus. Have you started thinking about the crucifixion?

I have. The future scenes seem to write themselves over and over in my head. It's going to be horrible. I have experienced that in writing novels. I knew, for

example, in the *Feast of All Saints*, Marie—one of the main characters—was going to be assaulted. As I got nearer and nearer to writing the assault, I got physically sick. It was monstrous, really. I really did hope the cup would pass. But this is what I had committed to do in the novel, and it was a crucial scene in the novel. I imagine the crucifixion will be that, multiplied a thousand times.

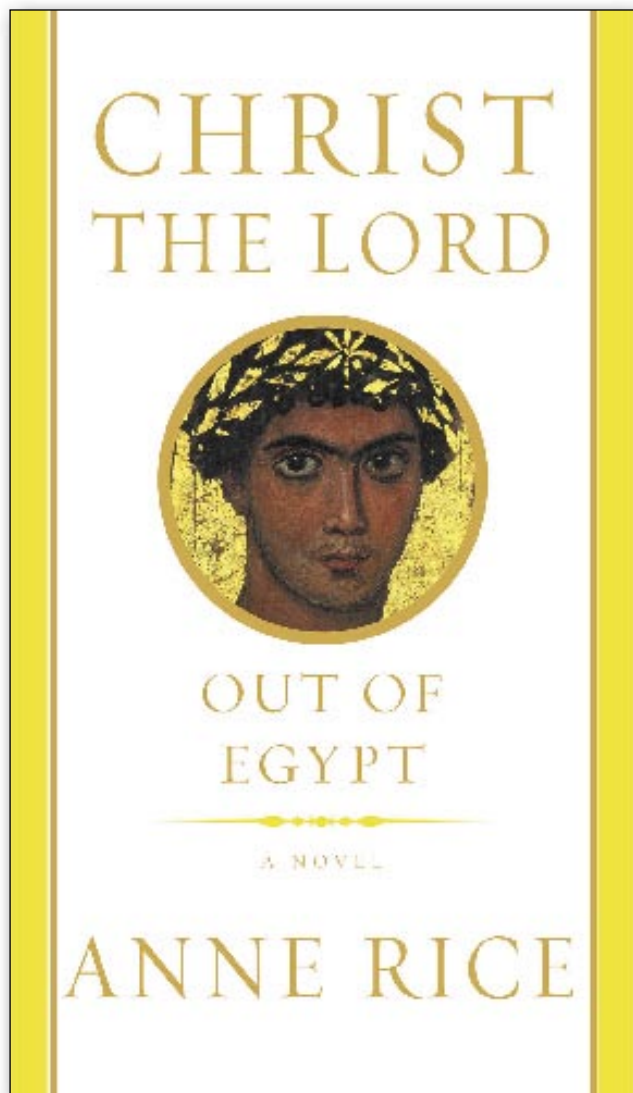
If I do this novel right, I hope the audience will be hoping that Jesus will get out of it, will be so identified with him that they are hoping up to the last minute that there is some other way—even when they know perfectly well that there isn't.

How do you balance getting the themes across and telling a good story?

It's hard. I think that I am able to take a crack at this because I have written twenty-seven books. You learn as a novelist how to build a story, how to put suspense into it, how to paint the characters. I am trying to take whatever I have learned from all those experiences with novels that were number-one bestsellers and put it in this story. Let me make this exciting, let me make this suspenseful, let me get the different characters and how they interact—and let me go behind the scenes. I want to imagine say, what Joseph and Mary are feeling in the stable in Bethlehem, when they realize that this child foretold by angels was being born in a manger. What was that like for them? They must have

been upset. They had to wonder—did we do something wrong? Is this how it was supposed to work out—the angels come and tell us about Jesus and now here we are in the stable?

And then what happens? The door opens and in walk shepherds who have



seen angels, witnesses that can't contain themselves. That must have been tremendous reassurance for the Holy Family. I don't think the Holy Family ever doubted—they don't doubt. But the trouble with a lot of the bad fiction is that in painting a Holy Family that doesn't doubt, the writer won't get into any grit into the story. They won't get the hay in the scene except in the most pious way. □