

Nobody Said Boo When Anne Rice Came to New Orleans

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But When the Occult Novelist Bought Church Properties, Things Got Really Bizarre

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NEW ORLEANS — Even after she arrived at a book-signing party in a coffin carried by a horse-drawn hearse, novelist Anne Rice didn't seem to offend her neighbors in the genteel Garden District.

The woman is weird, but this is New Orleans.

Few eyebrows were raised when word got out that Ms. Rice's idea of interior

decorating is skeletons and anatomically correct dolls, some with tiny teeth marks on their necks. There was no hue and cry when she popped up on her porch one Halloween in a nun's habit. Even the fans in black velvet who come to gawk at her mansion caused very little grumbling, though they do tend to litter and, occasionally, chant.

But then Ms. Rice, the author of "Interview With a Vampire" and other hugely popular novels about libidinous witches and the sensual undead, this year bought Our Mother of Perpetual Help Chapel from the Redemptorist Order of Priests. It was the writer's third purchase of a New Orleans property with a Catholic past, and one too many for parishioners to stomach. Ms. Rice was born Irish Catholic in New Orleans 54 years ago but broke with the church in her youth.

"She's making a mockery of the church," says Mary Kay Parker, who pulled her seven-year-old daughter out of catechism classes at the chapel following the sale. "I won't have my child taking the sacrament in a building owned by Anne Rice."



Anne Rice

So now, the Garden District is in an uproar. Catholics are offended that a celebrity with a strange take on Christianity should own the chapel, which is to be deconsecrated at year's end and restored for use as a Rice family residence. Ms. Rice returns their fire, accusing her well-to-do neighbors of "elitism." She says they are just afraid to attend the nearest church, which is across the street from public housing.

Intimations of Sacrilege

The extended Rice family and people hereabouts view one another with increasing disdain. "They've even spread rumors that Anne's going to perform voodoo rites in the chapel at midnight," says the author's cousin, William Murphy, who, like many relatives, works for Kith & Kin LLC, Ms. Rice's management company. "We've talked about putting on grass skirts and sacrificing a watermelon on the front lawn just to satisfy them."

Residents aren't just worried about Ms. Rice's "Munsters" lifestyle. They have the secular concern that the Garden District is becoming the Anne Rice Business District. City Hall has yet to rule on complaints that Kith & Kin failed to secure necessary permits for its recently inaugurated Inside the World of Anne Rice Walking Tours, which for \$30 a head offers a guided ramble through the district and a visit to the garden of a 139-year-old mansion Ms. Rice bought in 1989, when she moved back to New Orleans after an absence of 30 years. Homeowners count the seats on sightseeing-tour vans that stop at the Rice house, to be sure they don't exceed 20, the legal limit.

"It's a shame there's been such an emotional reaction to everything," says

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Martha Ann Samuel, the Rice family real-estate agent. "Anne's never had anything but good intentions."

But the Garden District, famed for its 19th-century architecture and ancient oak and crape myrtle trees, drew tourists long before Ms. Rice and her husband, the poet and painter Stan Rice, moved in with their teenage son.

Reason to Be Upset

Moreover, New Orleans is accustomed to the bizarre, says Louise Martin, who owns an antebellum house a block from the Rice mansion. "It takes a lot to unsettle us." But the "Vampire novelist," as Ms. Rice is known, has managed to offend with her accretion of Catholic real estate for nonreligious purposes. "The cultural history of religion in this part of Louisiana is older than the U.S. by dozens of years," says Brother Patrick Ellis, president of the Catholic University of America in Washington. "I can see why people are so uptight."

Ms. Rice can't. She insists her interests aren't mischievous but purely preservationist, and that she buys the Catholic buildings she loved as a child to save them from Formosan termites, greedy developers and neglect. She started in 1993 by spending about \$1 million on a 47,000-square-foot former Catholic girls' orphanage. Next she snapped up a Greek Revival cottage where she had lived for two years as a child, and which in earlier years was a convent and a Catholic school run by the Redemptorists. The cottage is now her guest house, while the orphanage, the scene for her annual "coven party," has Rice family offices and a museum displaying her collection of antique dolls.

Then she approached the financially strapped Redemptorist Order about the chapel, a converted mansion in use as a church since the 1920s. Her mother's funeral mass had been said there. After a year of secret negotiations, she bought the timeworn building early this year for \$750,000, and also got title to adjacent Redemptorist living quarters abutting the cottage she acquired earlier.

Poor Timing

It was unfortunate, perhaps, that parishioners were informed of the chapel sale on Palm Sunday, and that Ms. Rice's novel "Memnoch the Devil," which tells the creation story from the viewpoint of Satan and features a vampire meeting Christ on the road to the Crucifixion, was still on bestseller lists. But parishioners had allowed the landmark to fall into a state "nothing short of monstrous," Ms. Rice said in a letter to neighbors, and "have made it impossible for me to sympathize with them because they will not assume responsibility."

She has pledged to restore the half-city-block of prime Garden District real estate once owned by the Redemptorists. Members of the order, who don't give interviews on the subject, have given her their blessing in well-circulated letters.

And why not? New Orleans is renowned for blending Catholicism with boozy rev-

elry. The bacchanalia that is Mardi Gras, after all, is an anything-goes runup to the first day of Lent. "You'd figure that her kind of decadence would fit in real nice with the weird Old World charm around here," says Philip Melancon, a New Orleans cabaret singer who regularly skewers Ms. Rice in a ditty that includes this line: "If the Holy See will hawk it, Anne Rice jumps in the market."

But Mr. Melancon has watched affronted locals stomp out in the midst of his Rice numbers. "These folks take their religion and their writers real serious," he says. "And I think Anne Rice gets a kick out of tweaking the church."

A Continuing Pull

Though Ms. Rice is a former Catholic (her house includes a Zen meditation room), she continues to be drawn to the religion. Catholics are spiritual, she has said, as opposed to Protestants, who are "less magical, more practical, more down-to-earth." So she chose St. Assumption, an abandoned Catholic Church here, for her latest local book signing.

Flanked by three bodyguards as she autographs copies of "Servant of the Bones" near the altar, Ms. Rice, in a beaded headdress, flowing red cape and fingerless lace gloves, pauses to say that she is astonished at all the fuss: "It's hilarious really, isn't it?"

Under the circumstances, Garden District Catholics might be relieved to know that the main character in Ms. Rice's latest novel is a Jewish ghost.