



## Rice, Christopher (b. 1978)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Christopher Rice on a research tour in Thailand. Photograph by Sue Tebbe. Image courtesy Christopher Rice.

Christopher Rice is the author of five popular, gay-themed suspense thrillers, each of which has appeared on the *New York Times* best sellers list. He has also been active in supporting glbtq causes, especially those affecting glbtq youth.

He was born into a family of writers. His parents are Anne Rice, the celebrated and prolific author of over twenty gothic, horror, erotica, mystery, and religious-themed novels (and who also publishes under the pseudonyms Anne Rampling and A. N. Roquelaure), and the late poet and painter Stan Rice (1942-2002). His aunt, Anne's older sister, Alice Borchardt (1939-2007), began writing historical romance and fantasy novels in her mid-50s after a 30-year career as a licensed vocational nurse.

Rice was only 22 years old when he made his literary debut with *A Density of Souls* in 2000. The novel instantly became a media sensation and commercial success. However, the book's intrinsic merits were often eclipsed by derisive comments among the critical establishment and accusations of favoritism stemming from Rice's family connections.

In an interview with the *Advocate* given shortly after the novel's publication, Rice directly addressed such allegations. "The only thing that can dispel people's notions that I'm just a product of nepotism is the book," he told journalist David Bahr. "I can only write what I want and hope it gets out there, and that public appeal draws me out of [my mother's] shadow."

With the release of each successive novel, Rice has successfully overcome much critical skepticism and in the process has earned a measure of literary respect.

Christopher Travis Rice was born on March 11, 1978 in Berkeley, California. He was the second child born to Anne and Stan Rice. Their first child, Michele, died of leukemia in 1972 at the age of six. His parents withheld any information about his sister until Rice himself was six years old. He later admitted to being affected by his parent's reticence, but in turn has used it creatively in his novels to investigate the nature of secrets and the justifications for keeping them.

Rice lived in San Francisco's Castro district until he was 10 years old when his family moved to New Orleans, his mother's hometown. It was a difficult transition for Rice. "Growing up in the Castro made me feel that being gay would always be an option," he revealed in an interview. "But then being dropped in New Orleans, it was completely different. I went from a school in San Francisco where we called our lesbian teachers by their first names to this uptown, private elementary school where we all had to go to chapel in the morning. I'm sure I suppressed a lot of gay feelings for a long time."

His sexuality also compounded his discomfort in high school, although he later found a degree of consolation in acting. "I was the class fag because I didn't play a sport," Rice explained. "Because I did plays and I was a little pretty boy and I was thin and wispy. That tapered off as high school progressed and people found their niche. I went from being the fag to being the more respected actor."

He graduated from New Orleans's prestigious Isidore Newman School in 1996. He has described his experience at the wealthy high school as one shaped by his homosexuality. "I didn't feel a threat to my physical well being, just my emotional well being. Growing up gay and knowing I was different, I was in an odd position. I had all the trappings that could have helped me to fit into the social hierarchy of the school. I had money, had a nice car, was white. I could have fit, but I knew I didn't belong. I knew I didn't share their dreams and ambitions and their values."

Although Rice had been going to gay bars and clubs while still a high school senior, it was not until he graduated and met his first boyfriend that he came out to his parents. Rice concedes that while his father had no difficulty accepting his son's sexuality, his mother had some trouble believing it.

It was not that Anne Rice reacted with anger or hatred to her son's coming out, Rice has stated; she merely thought that his homosexuality was a phase that would pass, as she had also seen her son in relationships with girls in high school.

As Anne Rice herself explained to the *Advocate* in 2000, "People respond in very different ways to what being gay means. And there's still an enormous amount of fear in America. There are still hate crimes. There is still a lot of consciousness-raising that has to be done--but not with us. I was worried, as anybody would be, that Chris would face obstacles and prejudices. But I did not love him one drop less."

In the fall of 1996, Rice entered Brown University as an aspiring theater student, but left after one semester when he failed to be cast in a single Brown theatrical production.

"I was in instant gratification mode," Rice later admitted. "I auditioned for two shows my freshman year and didn't get called back and thought, well that's it. I've got to go do something that no one can prevent me from doing. . . . So instead I wrote a play. And it wasn't that good. But it was done; that was the key. I had actually finished something. And then I wrote a screenplay. Which also wasn't that good. But, I also finished it."

He then transferred to New York University's Tisch School of the Arts to study screenwriting, but left without graduating. He was unhappy with the school's dramatic writing program, but became consumed by writing as a pursuit, and gave up the idea of acting altogether.

Rice remains self-conscious about not having graduated from college and, in interviews, sometimes mentions that he has not read widely enough. On the other hand, he is enormously articulate and is certainly well informed about popular culture in general and popular literature in particular.

After dropping out of NYU, he moved to Los Angeles, where he began working in earnest on his own screenplays.

In December 1998, Rice received a phone call from New Orleans explaining that his mother had gone into a diabetic coma. The news came as a complete surprise, as no one was even aware that she was diabetic. That same day Rice took a flight back to his parents' home. He learned that his mother was out of danger but would need a long convalescence. He remained in New Orleans to help his family through the ordeal.

It was during this period that Rice began work on what would eventually become his first novel, *A Density of Souls*. "Being back home and confronting all the very vivid memories that came pouring back," Rice later stated, "and having everything around me spinning completely out of control, I needed an environment I could control. That was the world of [my] novel."

Rice drew inspiration from five screenplays he had started but had eventually abandoned. He showed an early draft of the novel to his father, who was enthusiastic and encouraged his son to continue working on it.

Two years later, when the novel was nearly finished, he showed it to his mother for the first time. She too was enthusiastic about his work. According to the *Advocate*, she said, "Wow. I'm absolutely blown away by this novel. I think it's as courageous as it is brilliant."

His mother's agent, Lynn Nesbit, read the novel and agreed to represent it. *A Density of Souls* was published in 2000. The novel chronicles the lives of four students at an exclusive New Orleans prep school whose friendships are shattered by a past sexual secret.

Although one of the novel's main characters, Stephen, is a gay theater enthusiast, Rice has repeatedly stressed that the book is not autobiographical. "I did physically model [Stephen] after myself: I gave him blond hair, I made him tall, I gave him blue eyes. And he is gay. But I wasn't subject to half the brutality he is in the book."

The novel was met with decidedly mixed reviews and the media coverage mainly focused on the author's familial connection with Anne Rice, but it ultimately became a national best seller.

While *The New York Times Book Review* called it a "feverish debut . . . simultaneously daft and disturbing," *The Washington Post Book World* noted that the novel offers "unexpected twists and a cleverly planned mystery." Other reviewers compared him to Brett Easton Ellis and Stephen King. The novel was also praised for its evocation of high school culture and recommended as a young adult novel, especially for glbtq youth.

The novel was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Mystery in 2000.

In 2001, then New York City Public Advocate Marc Green recognized Rice as an outstanding leader among gay men and lesbians. That same year, the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a non-profit organization devoted to serving the needs of glbtq youth, presented Rice with an Emery Award for his contributions to the community.

Rice's second novel, *The Snow Garden*, was published in 2002; it too climbed to the top of the best seller lists. *Out Magazine* called the book "a dark, moody thriller," and a reviewer for *Library Journal* commented that it was "rife with murder, fear, madness, and homoeroticism."

Gay characters again play central roles in the novel, a murder mystery set on a snowbound New England college campus. However, during an interview given shortly after the novel's publication, Rice explained that he was trying to "shrug off" being labeled a "gay author."

The implication of that categorization, Rice noted, was that an author only writes about "gay characters in gay ghettos." Although, he said, his first novel was "as close to a gay book as you can get," his second novel, with its ensemble of gay and straight characters, was more about "identity" than sexuality.

Rice has stated that it was a difficult book to write, especially following the media storm surrounding his debut novel. As he explained in an interview, "I think the first book is the one you've been waiting to write, and the second book is not. The second book is the one you have to write with the voices of a bunch of critics in your head. And that was a big challenge."

The novel won a Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Mystery in 2002.

After his father's death in 2002, Rice wrote a moving account of his relationship with him, indicating his gratitude for his easy acceptance of his homosexuality, for *The Advocate*. The guest column was so successful that the magazine invited him to become a regular columnist. His wide-ranging column, "Coastal Disturbances," offers his very personal--sometimes irreverent--perspective on contemporary gay life.

In 2005, Rice released his third book, *Light Before Day*. The novel is set within the predominantly gay West Hollywood section of Los Angeles and centers around a young gay journalist named Adam Murphy and his pursuit to expose the truth behind the death of Daniel Brady, a closeted Marine helicopter pilot.

Unlike his previous two novels, *Light Before Day* is written in the first person, as a tribute of sorts to his father, a poet. As Rice explained, "My father told me . . . that he felt I didn't trust the first-person voice and was therefore suspicious of poetry in general, including his, which I often poked fun at when I was much younger." He dedicated the novel to his father.

Rice's next book, *Blind Fall*, was published in 2008. A suspense thriller about gays in the military, Rice has called it "a novel about self-acceptance. It's about how we are often forced to let go of something we believed to be an absolute truth before we can treat ourselves with the same respect we would grant our closest friend."

It tells the story of John Houck, a somewhat homophobic former Marine sergeant, who discovers that Mike Bowers, the respected captain who saved his life in combat, was secretly gay and has been brutally murdered. John reluctantly teams up with Mike's boyfriend Alex to avenge the murder.

The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* called the novel "a tale of forgiveness and redemption, in an examination of the many facets of relationships between men."

Rice's most recent novel, *The Moonlit Earth*, is a psychological thriller set mainly in Hong Kong. The plot involves terrorism and the manipulation of the media. A gay flight attendant, Cameron Reynolds, is considered a prime suspect in a hotel bombing; his sister, Megan, believes that he is alive and innocent and travels to Hong Kong to discover the truth.

At the heart of the book is family--both family relationships and family secrets.

*The Moonlit Earth* received mixed reviews, but *Booklist* found it "a fast-paced thriller with an engaging story and solidly designed characters. At some moments, the plot seems a bit contrived, but you could say that about most thrillers, and the author pushes through those moments, keeping our focus on the forward motion of the narrative."

Rice has served as President of the Lambda Literary Foundation Board of Trustees.

He currently lives in West Hollywood.

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### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.

