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interview

Christopher Rice, 2007

Mystery Man: Talking with Christopher Rice

Interview by Craig Kaczorowski

Christopher Rice.
Detail from a
photograph by Sue
Tebbe.

With his gay-themed plots in gay-friendly settings, Christopher Rice has carved out a lucrative niche for himself in the crowded book world of the mystery/thriller genre.

As in all articles about Rice, his pedigree and age must be immediately mentioned—he is the son of celebrated gothic horror novelist Anne Rice and the late poet and painter Stan Rice. He was also a mere 22 years old when his first novel, *A Density of Souls*, was published in 2000 and became an instant sensation. Since then, he has gone on to publish three other top sellers—*The Snow Garden* (2001), a murder mystery set on a New England college campus, *Light Before Day* (2005), an exploration of revenge and obsession set within the crystal meth subculture of West Hollywood, and *Blind Fall*, a mystery rooted in the U.S. Marine Corps.

I caught up with Rice one Sunday afternoon to discuss his thoughts on gay writers, ideal readers, and his fascination with Marines.

Kaczorowski: In past interviews you've said you don't necessarily consider yourself a "gay writer" even though you are an out gay man and you write gay-themed novels. What does the term "gay writer" mean to you? How do you define it?

Rice: I don't know if I would call anyone a "gay writer." I think it's like "alcoholic." It's a self-identifying word. And I don't mean to equate them in terms of value or judgment. But, it's one of those things where people either proclaim themselves to be a gay writer or not. And those who do are committed to writing exclusively about issues that concern the gay community and about characters who are living within it or struggling with living outside of it. Those themes kind of run through my books, but they are primarily character specific. They are specific to whichever character I have fallen in love with at the time. With *The Snow Garden*, my second novel, I fell in love with a straight woman and a gay man, and I wanted to write about their relationship, about trust and betrayal and infidelity. Topics that aren't necessarily exclusive to gay people. So, with that book especially, I was not willing to call it a "gay" book or embrace the term "gay writer." I think also the implication that everyone's afraid of is that it announces that your work is not capable of being compared to that of straight writers.

Kaczorowski: So, do you think there are obstacles to overcome if an author considered him or herself a gay writer?

Rice: Absolutely. I think that what people don't realize happens when they embrace that label is that the implication becomes, because they are committed to being a gay writer, they are either going to ignore or throw out various fundamental aspects of storytelling. That they don't need them or that they are committed to writing a social chronicle. And it implies that their book is actually not going to be as engrossing or as entertaining as something [written by] someone who isn't using that label. I'm someone who believes very strongly that to be a writer you enter into a contract of sorts with your reader and you have to fulfill certain obligations. I think when we get into those sort of ghetto labels the implication is: "Oh, no, I won't be fulfilling those obligations for you; if you're gay you'll just appreciate my work because I'm a gay writer but I'm not actually going to take the extra effort to make you believe in the story."

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Kaczorowski: Would you ever consider writing a completely non-gay novel, set within an exclusively heterosexual environment? Is that something that would interest you?

Rice: It is something that would interest me. I don't feel the urge very strongly now. But, I think if I were to write a straight novel it would be as a way of moving into another genre, like supernatural horror or quasi-science fiction. It would be about a really different exploration for me. I would set aside the old ways of addressing sexuality that I have been using to do something completely new. Sort of wiping the slate clean. And that's an attractive idea.

Kaczorowski: Do you have any notion of your readership? Is it primarily gay, straight, mixed?

Rice: I have a notion of who shows up at my book signings and who contacts me via email. And that's primarily gay men. With a smattering of young straight women. Actually, I sell more books at signings at Gay Pride events probably than anywhere else. I don't know if it's because people have had a few beers and are more inclined to buy a book that they may not read! But the consensus about my books is that given the numbers at which they sell, there is a silent audience of women out there that is reading them, because the wisdom in [publishing] is that you cannot have a best seller without women. That even Tom Clancy has got scores of women reading his books. The women are who put books on the best seller list. All three of my books have been best sellers, so it must be all these women I've never met. These silent women readers.

Kaczorowski: When you are writing do you have an ideal reader in mind?

Rice: It's me! I'm writing for myself. I'm the ideal reader. I am writing the book that I want to read. I'm a voracious reader. I think all writers begin as readers, and so I'm writing the book that would most satisfy me. Which is more challenging I think than a lot of people realize. I'm a tough self-critic and nobody is subjected to harsher criticism than I am. Sometimes it's about lightening up and letting it come out. But other times it's about saying: "You wouldn't buy that; you wouldn't let that slide if it were someone other than you."

Kaczorowski: So, are you writing books that fill a void for you as a reader?

Rice: I think so. To a degree. I wouldn't belittle the writers who have written similar books over the years, but I think that I definitely, in the beginning, wanted big, ballsy, over-the-top thriller type stories involving gay characters. And I really didn't see a lot of them out there. Most of what I saw out there was great, but it was small, it was intimate, it was literary. I wanted spectacle. I wanted action. I wanted violence. And I think my first book filled a void in that regard. There were a lot of readers out there who weren't gravitating to the traditional gay stuff and wanted a sort of adrenalin-fueled story. I think that was a big appeal. And so in that sense I did write the book that I wanted to read.

Kaczorowski: When your first novel came out you were quite young, 22 years old. And it made a big splash. Were you prepared for all that media attention or did it come as a complete surprise?

Rice: It came as a surprise. I really underestimated the power of my mother's last name! I thought that a book with that many gay characters in it wouldn't launch the way it did. I remember the *Advocate* had agreed to do a piece on me, and when they called back and said it was going to be the cover I was genuinely floored. This is going to sound crazy, but I underestimated the power of readers. I had sort of a dismissive, arrogant, youthful attitude toward books. The attitude that this was something I had done in my spare time and that what I really wanted to do was movies, that what people really cared about today were movies. It was an eye-opening experience all around. But, no, I wasn't prepared for [the media attention] and there are a lot of people who have said of me that my comments about me not being prepared for it are disingenuous, but they don't know what they are talking about!

Kaczorowski: Did the celebrity of that first novel shape the writing of your subsequent novels? Did it have an effect on how you thought about your career or your writing?

Rice: In the beginning it did. 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. I think *The Snow Garden* was very hard to write as a result of that. I feel like, because I got published so young, I am continuing to learn. It feels to me like a lot of the older writers I know, before they started writing they found the writers that most influenced them. And I hadn't. I am continuing to discover the writers that most influence me as I go along.

Kaczorowski: Who are some of those writers?

Rice: About two years ago, before I wrote *Light Before Day*, I discovered the great classic noir detective writers. I read Raymond Chandler for the first time. But Ross MacDonald is probably the most influential. Raymond Chandler is all about his voice, and people try to imitate it but it's really not possible. I had an early draft of *Light Before Day* but it was so far in that direction that I had to scale it back. Ross MacDonald did things with psychology and characterizations that are inspiring to us all. A lot of my friends are well-known mystery writers, and all of them were influenced in some way by his work.

Kaczorowski: Are there any gay-themed novels that have influenced you?

Rice: I think that *Like People in History* by Felice Picano is one of the most influential gay novels that I have read. It was influential for me at the time because [it's] about these places that I hadn't been to yet, like Fire Island and Provincetown and West Hollywood. The world of it was so exotic to me. But also, it was the scope of it that was so inspiring. It was really sort of brave because it covered so much. Later on I met him and we've become friends, but at the time he was a big influence.

Kaczorowski: Any of the gay classics—*Dancer from the Dance* or *A Boy's Own Story*?

Rice: I have read Edmund White's later work and was profoundly affected by it. I read *The Married Man* and it kind of blew me away. The sadness of *The Married Man* is still with me. But I haven't gotten to his earlier works yet. I have not read *Dancer from the Dance*; its one of the one's on the list that I need to read eventually.

Kaczorowski: You primarily write in the mystery/thriller genre. Is this a genre that you are most attracted to as a reader as well as a writer?

Rice: Yeah, absolutely. James Lee Burke is a god! But it took me a while to get into the genre. When I wrote *A Density of Souls* I wasn't immersed in the genre. I found something too cold about it. I was reading these books by Jonathan Kellerman and James Lee Burke, both of whom I came to enjoy. But at first, the perspective of their detectives was too detached for me. At the time I was more involved in characters who were caught in the middle of the whirlwind of whatever was going on. Whereas, the thing I have come to love about the mystery [genre] is that it is about the character who shows up after the whirlwind has wreaked its havoc. They're the ones who have to sift through the wreckage and contemplate everything and it allows for a writer to get a lot more of their own personal beliefs on the page. The worst of it is preachy and sermonizing but the best of it is contemplative and introspective. You develop, if you read one of these series like James Lee Burke's over time, an intimacy with the hero that is unmatched by any kind of film experience.

Kaczorowski: Do you have any interest or plans to write in a different genre? Will we see a Christopher Rice romance comedy, for example?

Rice: I think we are more likely to see a Christopher Rice horror novel, a supernatural horror novel. Sort of Steven King-ish. I am not a fan of the horror trend that has taken over film, that sort of super gore. I can't watch it. It's too disturbing to me. But, I thought *Cell*, Stephen King's last book, was one of his best. Stephen King was really the first popular writer that I began to devour—much to my mother's chagrin! It took me a while to appreciate her books because I was in a defiant phase. But Steven King was really my introduction to popular fiction and to read *Cell*, to read something that good, really inspires me. I think maybe I'll go in that direction at some point.

Kaczorowski: You did not start out intending to be writer. I believe theater and acting were your first love.

Rice: Yes.

Kaczorowski: Why did you abandon that?

Rice: I went to college and they really weren't interested in casting me. I was in instant gratification mode; 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. Whereas, if I had been more patient, who knows, maybe I would have ended up acting. I mean, I was a freshman; they never get cast in anything. 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.

Kaczorowski: And do you continue to write screenplays or did you abandon that pursuit when you started writing novels?

Rice: I continue to write screenplays. I'm actually getting paid well to write novels so I'm not able to take time off on a spec script that might not sell. Which is a good position to be in. But I still have a great love of screenplay writing and it is something I want to do in the future.

Kaczorowski: When you started writing *A Density of Souls* did that come as a surprise to you? Were you surprised that you had a novel, and subsequent novels, in you?

Rice: Yes! It did surprise me. I didn't think a novel was something I was going to be able to finish.

Kaczorowski: Because?

Rice: I thought it was too immense. I thought it was too long. And that was more my misconception of what the novel was supposed to do. I thought, starting out, that it was my job to create a movie experience through language alone and it led to a lot of overwriting. I didn't know yet to trust the character's behavior. And their dialogue, which is also behavior.

Kaczorowski: I know, inevitably, all interviews with you end up asking about your mother. And you have already mentioned her. But one thing I'm curious about, do you show your work to her before publication?

Rice: No. Because I don't want her stamp on it in that way. And that has worked out well for both of us, because she doesn't feel the burden of having to edit it for me. She's a very loving, but protective mother, and I think it would be too hard for her to read a manuscript version. She would want to get in there with me and do what she would want to do. So I think it's better I give her a galley.

Kaczorowski: Does she comment on it then?

Rice: Yes.

Kaczorowski: Both positively and negatively? Do you learn from her comments?

Rice: She did say *The Snow Garden* was one of the weirdest things she had ever read.

Kaczorowski: That's something coming from Anne Rice!

Rice: Exactly! I thought so too. She was a huge fan of *Light Before Day*. She loved it. And I think the negative comments have been constructive enough that I don't remember them.

Kaczorowski: Do you go to her for writing advice if you are stuck on something?

Rice: I think I have in the past. I can't remember. She's not my first choice. I have friends that I call first.

Kaczorowski: She has been very prolific in her writing. Is this something that you hope to emulate? To have that vast body of work across multiple genres?

Rice: Yeah. At the current time, I'm not moving as fast as she does. But I think that what would have to happen is I would have to lock into a recurring character. I think that's what makes a lot of writers prolific, if they really lock in to a hero or heroine that they can bring back book after book. And then they feel less afraid about starting because the groundwork of that character has already been done. So far, I am working on number four and they have all been from scratch—completely new protagonists, no recurring characters at all. But if I stumbled upon a character I really loved, maybe I'd become as prolific as her.

Kaczorowski: She has also written a lot of erotica. Is that something that would interest you?

Rice: No, it really doesn't interest me. My sexual fantasies are boring and run of the mill. They are just not exciting.

Kaczorowski: Now I have my headline: "Christopher Rice has boring sexual fantasies."

Rice: They're vivid! But they're not necessarily the most original.

Kaczorowski: What's next for you? I think you're coming out with another novel next year, called *Blind Fall*? [*Blind Fall* was published in 2008.]

Rice: Yes, it's about the Marine Corps.

Kaczorowski: What about the Marine Corps interests you?

Rice: Well, I love Marines! I'm writing about gay and straight

Marines. And the conflict between the two. It's a thriller. But I'm in the middle of it so I don't want to talk about it.

Kaczorowski: On that note, thank you very much for your time.

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About Craig Kaczorowski

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.



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