

Review of *Anne Rice and Sexual Politics: The Early Novels*

By Yupei Zhou

*Anne Rice and Sexual Politics: The Early Novels*

By James R. Keller

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In *Anne Rice and Sexual Politics*, James R. Keller provides a lucid and coherent critical account of the progressiveness and the conservatism of Anne Rice's early novels. Focusing on the gender and racial issues engaged by the novels, Keller's well-illustrated analysis is useful to students and scholars of gender and ethnic studies. Rice treats the reception of Rice's novels as a popular cultural phenomenon. Those who are interested in the study of popular culture may find Rice's book equally illuminating.

*Anne Rice and Sexual Politics* sets out to survey Rice's public persona and the rhetoric of her fiction, both of which reinforce traditional bourgeois norms and undermine her liberal representations of sexual and racial relations. Keller elaborates on how Rice carefully presents her public image as a conventional conservative and how she openly shows moral revulsion to the unconventional sexual experimentation extensively depicted in her early novels. Keller sharply points out that both the conservative subtext and the liberal text of Rice's fiction help to ensure the market value of her works and her position as a popular writer. Recognizing the aesthetic, literary, historical, psychological and philosophical values of Rice's fiction, Keller characterizes Rice's early writings as a negotiation "between high and low culture, between the elite and the popular, between literature and commercial fiction" (6). Rather than offering simplistic answers about Rice's treatment of sexuality and ethnicity, Keller gives her early novels a probing examination. His claims about Rice's challenge to the normative sexual and racial relations are not strikingly new. What is valuable is the dichotomy he discovers in Rice's fiction.

The arrangement of the chapters follows the publication order of the early novels. Addressing a theoretical problem or employing a literary theory for analysis, each chapter deals with one novel or a series of novels but contributes to the central theme of Rice's dichotomous attitude toward sexuality and ethnicity. Chapter 1, focusing on *The Vampire Chronicles*, targets the prevalent queer reading of the texts, which neglects Rice's ambivalence in attitude toward homosexuality. Especially illuminating to queer critics is Keller's perception that common queer reading only notices the presence of mixed gender and sex categories but fails to attend to the homophobic implications of the portrayals of homosexual relations in the series. The vampire homosexual

relations in the novels founded upon resentment and hostility rather than sentiment and commitment perpetuate the stereotypes of homosexuality. Keller directs the reader's attention to the aristocratic lifestyles of the vampire family, the textual parallel between AIDS and vampirism, and Rice's depiction of homosexuality as infantile and ruined heterosexuality. His analysis of Rice's stereotypical attitude toward homosexuality efficiently illustrates the compromise between her intentions of social condemnation and marketing.

Constructed upon the theory that whiteness and racial differences are social construct, Chapter 2 explores the portrayal of people of "color" in *The Feast of All Saints*. Rice's ambivalence lies in her acquiescence of middle class values and of the traditional racial and gender classifications and in her mixture of racial categories in the novel. Chapter 3 ingeniously applies Lacan's postulation of the mirror stage of human development to the reading of *Cry to Heaven*. Keller's analysis of Rice's revolutionary depiction of the eunuch family undermined by the conventional conclusion of the traditional family well supports his opinion that Rice ultimately empowers the phallus that determines identity and initiates signification.

Chapter 4 locates *The Erotic Adventures of Sleeping Beauty* in the controversy over the necessity of protecting children's sexual innocence. Sexual knowledge plays an important role in the lives of Rice's adolescent characters. Rice defies conventional morality by confirming Beauty's sexual torture that only results in wisdom and confidence. But Keller also perceives conservatism in Rice's conclusion where Beauty ends up in a conventional marriage. Rice, according to Keller, assumes that sexual knowledge is for orthodox objectives. In Chapter 5, Keller applies Bakhtin's theory about the disruptive nature of the carnival to his reading of *Exit to Eden*. Again, Keller examines how the parody of social power structure, sexual hierarchy and religious institutionalization in the novel is impaired by the conservative conclusions of the novel.

Chapter 6 reads Belinda as "an overt attack upon the principle of the kiddie porn panic of the 1970s" (138). However, Rice treats her adolescent character's homosexual experience as an experiment of immaturity and foregrounds the sexual attraction of mature individuals toward adolescents. Chapter 7 examines the trilogy of *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*. Whereas the novels chronicle the collapse of gender distinction, they also salvage, according to Keller, the male character's sexual virility toward the end of the novel and ultimately affirm sexism.

Although Keller's chapters involve different theories and social contexts, they are coherent and well organized. His argument is well made, solidly grounded in the texts. Keller balances the progressiveness of Rice's novels against their conservativeness. His observations well illustrate

the conflict between the efforts of similar texts to undermine the social construction of gender, class and racial categories and their writers' desire to cater to the public taste for market values. Keller's attention to the complexity of a writer like Anne Rice makes his book useful to critics of gender, class and racial politics alike. More importantly, Keller's lucid language also makes the book accessible to the common reader who is interested in Anne Rice. However, the critical theories used by the book are not well cited. Keller's bibliography is limited and is not expectedly useful.