

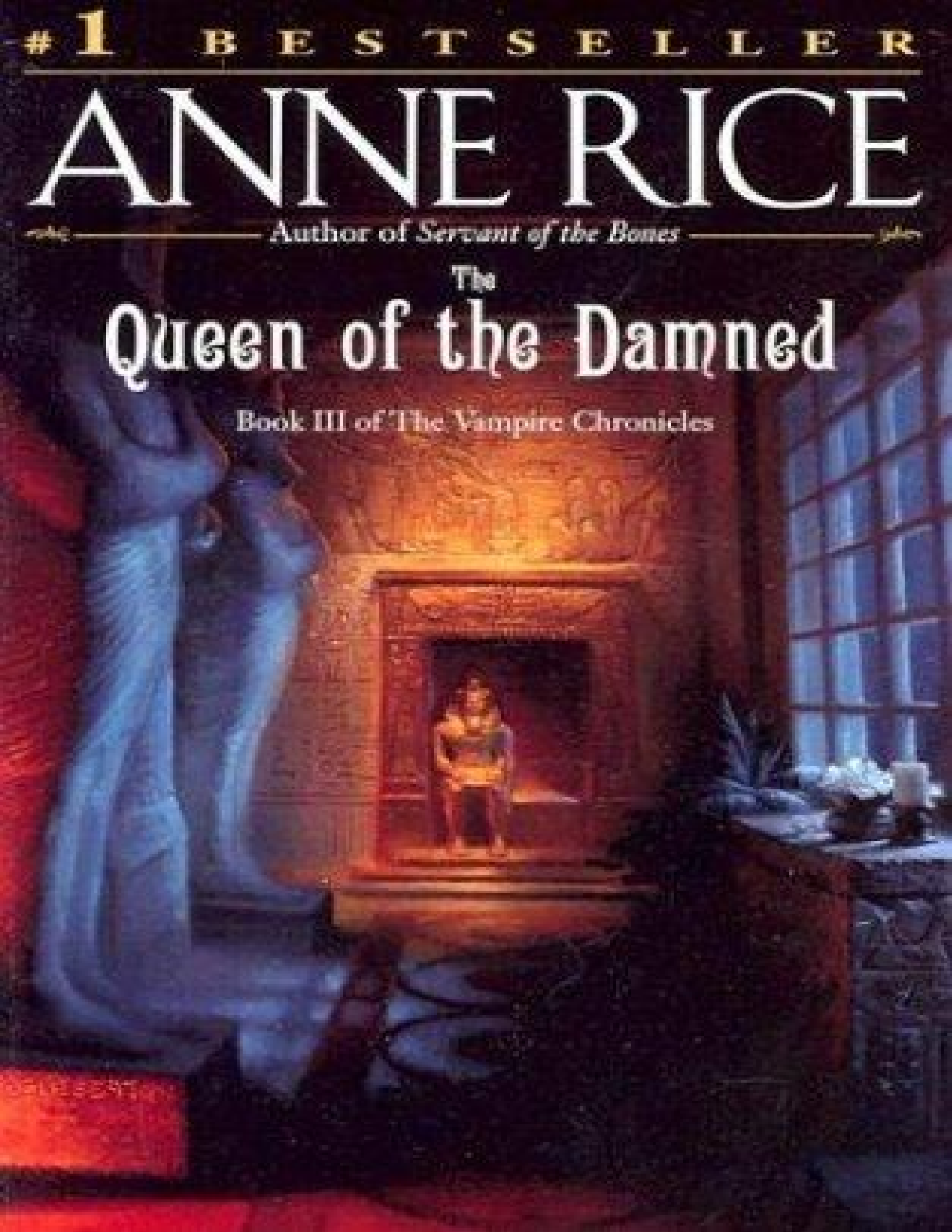
#1 BESTSELLER

ANNE RICE

Author of *Servant of the Bones*

The Queen of the Damned

Book III of The Vampire Chronicles



*This book is dedicated
with love
to
Stan Rice, Christopher Rice,
and John Preston*

*And to the memory
of
my beloved editors:
John Dodds
and
William Whitehead*

TRAGIC RABBIT

*Tragic rabbit, a painting.
The caked, ears green like rolled corn.
The black forehead pointing at the stars.
A painting on my wall, alone
as rabbits are
and aren't. Fat red cheek,
all Art, trembling nose,
a habit hard to break as not.*

*You too can be a tragic rabbit; green and red
your back, blue your manly little chest.
But if you're ever goaded into being one
beware the True Flesh, it
will knock you off your tragic horse
and break your tragic colors like a ghost
breaks marble; your wounds will heal
so quickly water
will be jealous.*

*Rabbits on white paper painted
outgrow all charms against their breeding wild;
and their rolled corn ears become horns.*

*So watch out if the tragic life feels fine—
caught in that rabbit trap
all colors look like sunlight's swords,
and scissors like The Living Lord.*

STAN RICE
Some Lamb (1975)

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I'M THE Vampire Lestat. Remember me? The vampire who became a super rock star, the one who wrote the autobiography? The one with the blond hair and the gray eyes, and the insatiable desire for visibility and fame? You remember. I wanted to be a symbol of evil in a shining century that didn't have any place for the literal evil that I am. I even figured I'd do some good in that fashion—playing the devil on the painted stage.

And I was off to a good start when we talked last. I'd just made my debut in San Francisco—first “live concert” for me and my mortal band. Our album was a huge success. My autobiography was doing respectably with both the dead and the undead.

Then something utterly unforeseen took place. Well, at least I hadn't seen it coming. And when I left you, I was hanging from the proverbial cliff, you might say.

Well, it's all over now—what followed. I've survived, obviously. I wouldn't be talking to you if I hadn't. And the cosmic dust has finally settled; and the small rift in the world's fabric of rational beliefs has been mended, or at least closed.

I'm a little sadder for all of it, and a little meaner and a little more conscientious as well. I'm also infinitely more powerful, though the human in me is closer to the surface than ever—an anguished and hungry being who both loves and detests this invincible immortal shell in which I'm locked.

The blood thirst? Insatiable, though physically I have never needed the blood less. Possibly I could exist now without it altogether. But the lust I feel for everything that walks tells me that this will never be put to the test.

You know, it was never merely the need for the blood anyway, though the blood is all things sensual that a creature could desire; it's the intimacy of that moment—drinking, killing—the great heart-to-heart dance that takes place as the victim weakens and I feel myself expanding, swallowing the death which, for a split second, blazes as large as the life.

That's deceptive, however. No death can be as large as a life. And that's why I keep taking life, isn't it? And I'm as far from salvation now as I could ever get. The fact that I know it only makes it worse.

Of course I can still pass for human; all of us can, in one way or another, no matter how old we are. Collar up, hat down, dark glasses, hands in pockets—it usually does the trick. I like slim leather jackets and tight jeans for this disguise now, and a pair of plain black boots that are good for walking on any terrain. But now and then I wear the fancier silks which people like in these southern climes where I now reside.

If someone does look too closely, then there is a little telepathic razzle-dazzle: *Perfectly normal, what you see*. And a flash of the old smile, fang teeth easily concealed, and the mortal goes his way.

Occasionally I throw up all the disguises; I just go out the way I am. Hair long, a velvet blazer that makes me think of the olden times, and an emerald ring or two on my right hand. I walk fast right through the downtown crowds in this lovely corrupt southern city; or stroll slowly along the beaches, breathing the warm southern breeze, on sands that are as white as the moon.

Nobody stares for more than a second or two. There are too many other inexplicable things around us—horrors, threats, mysteries that draw you in and then inevitably disenchant you. Back

to the predictable and humdrum. The prince is never going to come, everybody knows that; and maybe Sleeping Beauty's dead.

It's the same for the others who have survived with me, and who share this hot and verdant little corner of the universe—the southeastern tip of the North American continent, the glistening metropolis of Miami, a happy hunting ground for bloodthirsting immortals if ever there was such a place.

It's good to have them with me, the others; it's crucial, really—and what I always thought I wanted: a grand coven of the wise, the enduring, the ancient, and the careless young.

But ah, the agony of being anonymous among mortals has never been worse for me, greedy monster that I am. The soft murmur of preternatural voices can't distract me from it. That taste of mortal recognition was too seductive—the record albums in the windows, the fans leaping and clapping in front of the stage. Never mind that they didn't really believe I was a vampire; for that moment we were together. They were calling my name!

Now the record albums are gone, and I will never listen to those songs again. My book remains—along with *Interview with the Vampire*—safely disguised as fiction, which is, perhaps, as it should be. I caused enough trouble, as you will see.

Disaster, that's what I wrought with my little games. The vampire who would have been a hero and a martyr finally for one moment of pure relevance . . .

You'd think I'd learn something from it, wouldn't you? Well, I did, actually. I really did.

But it's just so painful to shrink back into the shadows—Lestat, the sleek and nameless gangster ghoulie again creeping up on helpless mortals who know nothing of things like me. So hurtful to be again the outsider, forever on the fringes, struggling with good and evil in the age-old private hell of body and soul.

In my isolation now I dream of finding some sweet young thing in a moonlighted chamber—one of those tender teenagers, as they call them now, who read my book and listened to my songs; one of the idealistic lovelies who wrote me fan letters on scented paper, during that brief period of ill-fated glory, talking of poetry and the power of illusion, saying she wished I was real; I dream of stealing into her darkened room, where maybe my book lies on a bedside table, with a pretty velvet marker in it, and I dream of touching her shoulder and smiling as our eyes meet. "Lestat! I always believed in you. I always knew you would come!"

I clasp her face in both hands as I bend to kiss her. "Yes, darling," I answer, "and you don't know how I need you, how I love you, how I always have."

Maybe she would find me more charming on account of what's befallen me—the unexpected horror I've seen, the inevitable pain I've endured. It's an awful truth that suffering can deepen us, give a greater luster to our colors, a richer resonance to our words. That is, if it doesn't destroy us, if it doesn't burn away the optimism and the spirit, the capacity for visions, and the respect for simple yet indispensable things.

Please forgive me if I sound bitter.

I don't have any right to be. I started the whole thing; and I got out in one piece, as they say. And so many of our kind did not. Then there were the mortals who suffered. That part was inexcusable. And surely I shall always pay for that.

But you see, I still don't really fully understand what happened. I don't know whether or not it was a tragedy, or merely a meaningless venture. Or whether or not something absolutely magnificent might have been born of my blundering, something that could have lifted me right

out of irrelevance and nightmare and into the burning light of redemption after all.

I may never know, either. The point is, it's over. And our world—our little private realm—is smaller and darker and safer than ever. It will never again be what it was.

It's a wonder that I didn't foresee the cataclysm, but then I never really envision the finish of anything that I start. It's the risk that fascinates, the moment of infinite possibility. It lures me through eternity when all other charms fail.

After all, I was like that when I was alive two hundred years ago—the restless one, the impatient one, the one who was always spoiling for love and a good brawl. When I set out for Paris in the 1780s to be an actor, all I dreamed of were beginnings—the moment each night when the curtain went up.

Maybe the old ones are right. I refer now to the true immortals—the blood drinkers who've survived the millennia—who say that none of us really changes over time; we only become more fully what we are.

To put it another way, you do get wiser when you live for hundreds of years; but you also have more time to turn out as badly as your enemies always said you might.

And I'm the same devil I always was, the young man who would have center stage, where you can best see me, and maybe love me. One's no good without the other. And I want so much to amuse you, to enthrall you, to make you forgive me everything. . . . Random moments of secret contact and recognition will never be enough, I'm afraid.

But I'm jumping ahead now, aren't I?

If you've read my autobiography then you want to know what I'm talking about. What was this disaster of which I speak?

Well, let's review, shall we? As I've said, I wrote the book and made the album because I wanted to be visible, to be seen for what I am, even if only in symbolic terms.

As to the risk that mortals might really catch on, that they might realize I was exactly what I said I was—I was rather excited by that possibility as well. Let them hunt us down, let them destroy us, that was in a way my fondest wish. We don't deserve to exist; they ought to kill us. And think of the battles! Ah, fighting those who really know what I am.

But I never really expected such a confrontation; and the rock musician persona, it was too marvelous a cover for a fiend like me.

It was my own kind who took me literally, who decided to punish me for what I had done. And of course I'd counted on that too.

After all, I'd told our history in my autobiography; I'd told our deepest secrets, things I'd been sworn never to reveal. And I was strutting before the hot lights and the camera lenses. And what if some scientist had gotten hold of me, or more likely a zealous police officer on a minor traffic violation five minutes before sunup, and somehow I'd been incarcerated, inspected, identified, and classified—all during the daylight hours while I lay helpless—to the satisfaction of the worst mortal skeptics worldwide?

Granted, that wasn't very likely. Still isn't. (Though it could be such fun, it really could!)

Yet it was inevitable that my own kind should be infuriated by the risks I was taking, that they would try to burn me alive, or chop me up in little immortal pieces. Most of the young ones, they were too stupid to realize how safe we were.

And as the night of the concert approached, I'd found myself dreaming of those battles, too.

Such a pleasure it was going to be to destroy those who were as evil as I was; to cut a swath through the guilty; to cut down my own image again and again.

Yet, you know, the sheer joy of being out there, making music, making theater, making magic!—that’s what it was all about in the end. I wanted to be alive, finally. I wanted to be simply human. The mortal actor who’d gone to Paris two hundred years ago and met death on the boulevard, would have his moment at last.

But to continue with the review—the concert was a success. I had my moment of triumph before fifteen thousand screaming mortal fans; and two of my greatest immortal loves were there with me—Gabrielle and Louis—my fledglings, my paramours, from whom I’d been separated for too many dark years.

Before the night was over, we licked the pesty vampires who tried to punish me for what I was doing. But we’d had an invisible ally in these little skirmishes; our enemies burst into flames before they could do us harm.

As morning approached, I was too elated by the whole night to take the question of danger seriously. I ignored Gabrielle’s impassioned warnings—too sweet to hold her once again; and I dismissed Louis’s dark suspicions as I always had.

And then the jam, the cliffhanger . . .

Just as the sun was rising over Carmel Valley and I was closing my eyes as vampires must do at that moment, I realized I wasn’t alone in my underground lair. It wasn’t only the young vampires I’d reached with my music; my songs had roused from their slumber the very oldest of our kind in the world.

And I found myself in one of those breathtaking instants of risk and possibility. What was to follow? Was I to die finally, or perhaps to be reborn?

Now, to tell you the full story of what happened after that, I must move back a little in time.

I have to begin some ten nights before the fatal concert and I have to let you slip into the minds and hearts of other beings who were responding to my music and my book in ways of which I knew little or nothing at the time.

In other words, a lot was going on which I had to reconstruct later. And it is the reconstruction that I offer you now.

So we will move out of the narrow, lyrical confines of the first person singular; we will jump as a thousand mortal writers have done into the brains and souls of “many characters.” We will gallop into the world of “third person” and “multiple point of view.”

And by the way, when these other characters think or say of me that I am beautiful or irresistible, etc., don’t think I put these words in their heads. I didn’t! It’s what was told to me after, or what I drew out of their minds with infallible telepathic power; I wouldn’t lie about that or anything else. I can’t help being a gorgeous fiend. It’s just the card I drew. The bastard monster who made me what I am picked me on account of my good looks. That’s the long and short of it. And accidents like that occur all the time.

We live in a world of accidents finally, in which only aesthetic principles have a consistency of which we can be sure. Right and wrong we will struggle with forever, striving to create and maintain an ethical balance; but the shimmer of summer rain under the street lamps or the great flashing glare of artillery against a night sky—such brutal beauty is beyond dispute.

Now, be assured: though I am leaving you, I will return with full flair at the appropriate

moment. The truth is, I hate not being the first person narrator all the way through! To paraphrase David Copperfield, I don't know whether I'm the hero or the victim of this tale. But either way, shouldn't I dominate it? I'm the one really telling it, after all.

Alas, my being the James Bond of vampires isn't the whole issue. Vanity must wait. I want you to know what really took place with us, even if you never believe it. In fiction if nowhere else, I must have a little meaning, a little coherence, or I will go mad.

So until we meet again, I am thinking of you always; I love you; I wish you were here . . . in my arms.