



THE AMERICAN FANTASY INTERVIEW WITH

# Andre Norton

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GRANDMASTER  
OF FANTASY

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Giving credit where credit  
is due on her 75th birthday.

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“People who have no imagination, who pride themselves on having none, are usually pretty dull people,” says Andre Norton. And in her 52 year career of writing action adventure stories on Earth, in elfland, or in space she has never catered to the type of person who, “will not be able to even visualize some of the discoveries . . . that come from a person who has an imagination.”

Norton has never lacked imagination. She began her career writing in what was then considered a man’s field because she wanted to write the sort of adventure stories which publishers commonly aimed at adolescent boys.

Her first published novel was *THE PRINCE COMMANDS* in 1934, which was reprinted by TOR in 1983: a Ruritanian romance very much in the tradition of *THE PRISONER OF ZENDA* and the Graustark books. It’s a swashbuckling romp, complete with princes, usurpers, revolutions, castles, honorable sacrifices and gallant struggles against insurmountable odds. Norton’s only concession to the fact that such books were generally written by men was to choose a male pseudonym.

“It was my own idea to use a name that could be masculine. I wasn’t writing science fiction then, because there wasn’t any, but adventure and that sort of thing. There were quite a few women authors in the



# AWARDS

Dutch Government: 1946

Headliner Award,  
Theta Sigma Phi: 1963

Invisible Little Man Award  
for science fiction: 1963

Cert. of Merit,  
Boy's Clubs of America: 1965

Phoenix Award: 1975

Gandalf Master  
of Fantasy Award: 1977

Andre Norton Award, Women  
Writers of Science Fiction: 1978

Balrog Fantasy Award: 1979

young adult group that I was writing for, but they usually wrote girl's stories and they would use their own names. The publishers knew I was a woman, but they agreed that the pseudonym was better since I was entering a purely masculine field of writing."

Selling her first book was rather easy it turned out.

"I never had much trouble. I had a manuscript and I had a list of publishers in alphabetical order, and I sent the manuscript to the first one on the list and they took it."

Norton's second published book was *RALESTONE LUCK*, an adventure novel set in New Orleans, which she had originally written in high school. After *THE PRINCE COMMANDS* sold, she dusted off the manuscript of *LUCK*, rewrote it and sold it as well. Oddly enough, though, she never intended to be a writer.

"I started out to be a history teacher. Then the Depression hit and I couldn't finish college, so I went into the library. I was in the library for some twenty years, but I wrote on my own time. I found it very interesting, and something that I really wanted to do, but I could only turn out a book about every eighteen months. I couldn't make a living writing until I left the library. You see, in those days the actual edition of a juvenile book was about five

thousand copies. Well, if you consider five thousand books spread all over this country that isn't very many, and you do not get much return for that. In those years they did not go into paperback either, so it was really not a very rewarding business. That is, rewarding as to the pay. Then I became ill and had to quit work. When I had to stay home, and wrote three books a year, why then it began to pay off."

Norton's science fiction of course, did go into paperback. She had always wanted to write sf and fantasy, but there was simply no market for it in book length when she began writing. Since she finds short stories difficult to write, it wasn't until *STAR-MAN'S SON* was published in 1952 that she at last entered the field for which she is best known today.

With her books it is sometimes difficult to tell where fantasy begins and sf leaves off. If, as Ursula LeGuin once said, "science fiction is red and fantasy is blue," then several of Norton's books have been magnificently purple. Her own opinion on the distinction is simple.

"The major difference between sf and fantasy is that in fantasy the hero attains his quest or performs his task by the use of magic, whereas in science fiction he uses instead, some as yet un-invented machinery of some kind, but it has to be realistic. I prefer, the more myth-like science fiction."

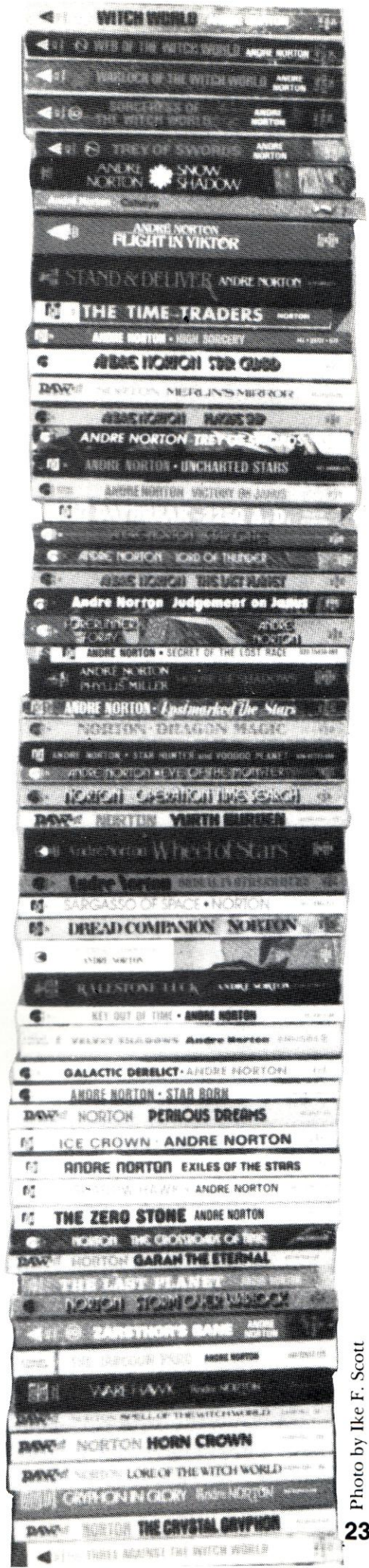


Photo by Ike F. Scott



**“... my publisher didn't want to accept it (ORDEAL IN OTHERWHERE). The story he told me was, that women didn't read science fiction, and the men would not read a book in which a woman was the protagonist . . . it sold fine. And I never had any more head-shaking after that.”**

WITCH WORLD, the book which inaugurated her most popular fantasy series, and incidentally, the ones she finds most interesting to write, is a good example of this. It begins by mystically transporting a man in Southeast Asia to a realm where magic is real. The world is under attack by aliens who use machines not entirely unfamiliar to the protagonist, and he allies himself with the forces of magic against the invaders. The main message seems to be that magic and science are just two different ways to accomplish the same tasks, and that the good or evil of the methods depends upon the beings who employ it. Norton's writing is primarily narrative; she concentrates on the story. That's what fiction writers should do, in her opinion: tell stories.

“When I write, I sort of see mental pictures that I'm describing. I just try to imagine what a person would do under those circumstances. I cannot work with an outline, but I do have a basic idea of what the book's going to be and I wait until I can picture a very vivid scene for the beginning. The idea is to present such a vivid scene to the reader at the opening of the book that they will want to read and read and read more. And you should end every one of your chapters with a cliffhanger, something to make them turn the page and see how they came out that time.”

So she begins with the story, sets it in a world which allows the imagination to roam freely, and then peoples it with interesting, believable characters that the reader can identify with and care about. A recurring theme in Norton's work is the use of a protagonist who is young, alone, perhaps orphaned, often penniless and unaware of his true identity.

“I think we all feel that way at times. We feel that no one agrees with us exactly and that we cannot have the world as we want it. Sometimes we feel rather lost in somebody else's world. Also, the stock premise of the adventure story or fantasy is the lone hero or heroine who has to set out and accomplish wonders in order to mature. I think the fact is that you're more likely to feel this loneliness and feeling of being out of step when you're young.”

CATSEYE, STORM OVER WARLOCK, JUDGEMENT ON JANUS, just to name a few, involve an adolescent trapped in a world he doesn't comprehend, but which he must learn to comprehend in order to survive. Sometimes the character

has lost his own world; sometimes he is the quintessential loner or outcast, who never had a world or home in the first place. As he understands his new world, the young hero comes to accept it—and in the process, to understand and accept himself. In a very real sense, Norton's books deal with what it means to be human and with the acceptance of humanity's strengths and weaknesses.

One of her most effective ways of spotlighting what it means to be human is the use of the intelligent animal, frequently but not always a cat, as an alien character. By showing us our world and ourselves through these alien eyes, Norton is able to give her protagonists and her readers a perspective on human nature which is at once different, non-human and almost eerily familiar. Animals, after all, are the aliens-among-us, and Norton's affection and respect for these 'others' with whom we share the earth is apparent in her writing.

“I'm interested in animals a great deal. I read a lot about them and if you've lived with cats as long as I have, you know just how intelligent they are.”

Norton uses research to flesh out her plots. She's interested in Wicca, for example, and uses that 'feel' for the magic in her books.

“I have a very large reference library and I have a great many books on Wicca, the various spells and things. You cannot use actual ceremonies or spells in your books, it just isn't done, but you can use it as a jumping off place for your own magic.”

Norton reads a great deal, though not as much fantasy as her readers might think.

“I have discovered that when I am working on a science fiction or fantasy book, I do not want to read other books of the same kind. It's far too easy to pick up somebody else's idea without knowing it. So I will then read mystery stories or non-fiction or something of that nature.”

Reading in fields outside her own is one of the ways she keeps coming up with ideas for new stories.

“The wider you read, the more chance you have of coming across something that will make a good story. Three of my books were developed from pictures that I had seen in books, and others have developed from a single sentence or a footnote or something of that kind in another book.”

Her interest in history led her to write some gothic novels during her career, but she's never had any desire to cross over into the horror story.

“I don't even like to read them. I do like a well done ghost story, and you find them mostly in England. For some reason the English have a stranglehold on the ghost story, and theirs are the best in the world. But those are different, they aren't full of blood and gore, and they're very well written. But a lot of horror stories I don't care for at all.

“The gothics that I did, and there were only a few of them, were done because I wanted to see whether I could write them or not, and because I love the Victorian period. I wanted to write some stories about the Victorian period. But I won't be doing any more gothics now.”

What she will be working on next is a collaboration with Susan Schwartz on a book she's wanted to do for years, a historical novel called SILVER SNOW.

“I always wanted to write the history of the Lady Chao in China, and I've gathered a great many books toward that effort. I'm going to write that now with a collaborator, because I have reached the point where I cannot carry a heavy historical novel to completion alone, but I can do the research and plotting and so forth.”

She seems comfortable working with co-authors, her only problem being a geographical one.

“Sometimes it's difficult because I usually collaborate with a person who is some distance away. We usually run up these telephone bills or we have to write long letters. Most of my collaborations have been in the juvenile books. I've been working with a former librarian, Phyllis Miller, on those because she has a very good and discerning eye for the kind of story she knows the libraries and the schools will like.”

Norton has been working on a project that involves an act of great daring for any writer. She is opening up her Witch World as a shared world anthology. She has finished a short story for the first book and is working on another for the fourth. What does she think about having other people writing in her world?

“It's interesting, because you wonder at their choices. Why they picked that particular situation or person to write about. It's very interesting to see your country through other people's eyes.

“We're doing a series of anthologies and I'm collecting stories now for the fourth book. We have three books that have been turned in, and the first one will be out sometime this year.”

This February 17th Andre Norton celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday and in her long career she has witnessed many changes in her field, one of them being the sudden boom in 'pure' fantasy.

“That was done entirely because of the sudden popularity of THE LORD OF THE RINGS, which led other people to try the same thing. Up until that time it had been mostly straight science fiction.”

This seems to have affected the juvenile field as well.



"The strongest part of what's being published as science fiction, (for juveniles) is mostly really fantasy."

But the biggest change by far and one that Norton has personally helped to bring about is the emergence of the strong female lead character.

"When I entered this field, there were very few women characters in science fiction or adventure stories. And the ones there were, were only there to stand around and wring their hands, and get captured by the big bug-eyed monsters. Now there are science fiction books in which the protagonist, the person upon whom the whole story depends is a women."

Norton's first book featuring a female lead character was not published until 1964. She had been writing then for thirty years.

"It was *ORDEAL IN OTHERWHERE*, and when I wrote that with a woman protagonist, my publisher didn't really want to accept it. The story he told me was that women didn't read science fiction, and the men would not read a book in which a

woman was the protagonist. But we persuaded him to try it and it sold fine. And I never had anymore head-shaking after that."

*ORDEAL IN OTHERWHERE*, curiously, is a direct sequel to *STORM OVER WARLOCK*, and the young male protagonist in that book is a major character in *ORDEAL*, but with a twist. In *STORM*, he had been the typically isolated, Norton hero, who must prove himself both to the elders and himself. In *ORDEAL*, he is the frequently helpless victim whom the heroine must rescue, and she is the castaway struggling to find a place for herself in a strange land.

As Norton has proved time and time again, the gender of the protagonist does not change the basic adventure plot: it merely opens up a whole new range of possible characters and situations for the writer to use.

She has changed publishers several times in her career, though it might be more accurate to say that her publishers have changed around her.

"Publishers change a lot. They sell to each other, an editor that you particularly like, goes to another publisher and you will follow, things like that. Nowadays, you don't even know who your publisher is. The company will be sold before your book is finished. You may say, why I have a book at Ace, and they'll say, no, now it's Berkeley."

But Norton, obviously, has never had any trouble finding a publisher, or an audience. Generations have grown up reading her books, and passing them on to their children. When asked about the great influence she has had on the field of sf and fantasy, her answer was only that she had tried to tell a story.

"That's the only way a writer can work, to just try to tell a story that will hold the reader's interest from the first page to the last."

Perhaps this is the reason for her continuing success as a storyteller, that for fifty-two years her incredible imagination has been able to touch the child in all of us, and keep us turning that page. ●

## An Andre Norton Bibliography

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