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NASHVILLE SCENE

Author Andre Norton

Fantasy Figure

By Michael Sims

The Purcell agenda
What is it?

Big spender?
State tax foe burned her travel receipts

Apocalypse now
Kevin Smith's 'Dogma' is a holy mess

Fantasy Figure

By Michael Sims

photographs by Eric England

Nowadays, we think of "fantasy" writing as a specialized genre, a subculture. But we forget that it was the original form of literature—tales of heroic struggle, encounters with the mysterious powers of nature, triumph over death. From *The Odyssey* to the Bible, marvelous adventure tales form the foundation of art and culture. And they are still with us. Not even in our technological sophistication have we outgrown our need for stories of the wondrous and magical—stories that remind us that the world we take for granted every day is truly a wondrous, surprising, near-magical place.

Day in and day out, writers sit down at their keyboards to produce tales about travel through time and space, about encounters with alien races whose differences serve as funhouse mirrors for our own quirks. They write about going back in time, witnessing the great events of history, or jumping far into the future. They ask "What if?" and gleefully depict parallel universes in which, say, magic works or Hitler won World War II.

continued on page 24

What is famed science fiction writer Andre Norton doing in Middle Tennessee?

Fantasy Figure *continued from page 23*

If the stories involve magic of some sort, such as C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, we dub them fantasy. Technological or cultural speculation—futuristic stories along the lines of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—we call science fiction. Frequently the two merge. Run-of-the-mill fantasy and science fiction remain at the same level as the average western or mystery novel—escapist entertainment with no artistic pretensions. But at their best, these idea-driven stories achieve the level of art, because literature arises not from the topic itself but from the mind of the writer. It's true of any genre. Naturally, there is a market for both ends of the spectrum, and for the wide range between. Most fans discover these kinds of stories as teenagers. Many lose interest after awhile, but as the groaning shelves in any bookstore will attest, millions of people do not.

There are many people writing fantasy and science fiction, but few if any have been at it as long as Andre Norton. Born before World War I, she was 20 years old when she sold her first novel. She has been a professional writer for two-thirds of this century. There have been at least 130 books by her during that time, earning her practically every honor in her field. Yet she is still writing every day, on her own and in various collaborations. Recently she launched a new project, a private research library for writers of genre fiction, the only one of its kind—and located in Middle Tennessee.

To fans who grew up reading her novels, it may seem anticlimactic to learn that Norton now lives and writes in quiet little Murfreesboro. Surely the creator of the Witch World series, the author of *Wraiths of Time* and *The Beast Master*, should reside in a castle on a stormy coast of Scotland, if not in a dome on Mars. How the octogenarian grand dame of fantasy came to be here, and what she is doing instead of resting on her laurels, makes for an unusual story.

Andre Norton with assistant Rose Wolf in the High Hallack Genre Writer's Research and Reference Library

Norton lives in a modest little house of tan brick on a quiet tree-lined street in Murfreesboro. From the outside, the house is distinguished from its neighbors only by a handicap access ramp. On an unseasonably warm November day, birds sing in the almost bare trees, and drifts of yellow leaves rustle in the grass.

Naturally, to get to the wizard, one must pass inspection by the guardian of the gate. Rose Wolf, Norton's assistant, greets visitors at the door. Slender, in her mid-40s, she has short spiky hair and eye shadow that seems to be a mix of both blue and gold. She wears two pins on her long gray dress—a witch on a broom, and beside her the castle toward which she is flying. Cats—nine of them, by a recent count—twine around visitors' legs, lounge on the stairs, patrol the hall, and doze on bookshelves and tables.

Wolf is friendly and colorful. She does air quotes, perpetrates shameless puns, and quotes lines from every literary work mentioned. The first room she takes me into is the author's office. Bookshelves line two walls, filled with hundreds of hardbacks and paperbacks. All are Norton's own titles, arranged in chronological order, with a copy of every edition in every language. Norton's books have been published in French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Arabic, and other languages, and also in braille and on audiocassette. Shelves are filled with Nebula Awards and World Fantasy Awards and a letter from the Queen of Holland in response to a historical novel about the Dutch Underground. All of these mementos are surrounded by snoozing felines. On the walls are scenes from fantasy and science fiction novels—spaceships, melancholy sirens.

Andre Norton herself enters the room with the help of a wheeled walker. She is 87 years old but looks younger, and although she doesn't move quickly she seems anything but frail. Her eyes are bright, her bearing erect and confident. In a patterned vest over a long blue dress, with permed hair and glasses, she looks elegant and poised. She offers a seat and herbal tea. Instantly the conversation takes off, a far-ranging ramble inspired by books, cats, awards, computers. Any subject that comes up gets her full attention. She has a sharp mind and a quick sense of humor.

She lowers herself carefully into a chair and begins to answer questions about herself and the curious project that inspired her to leave her longtime home in Florida and move to Tennessee. It was, appropriately, something of a quest—only the latest in Norton's long and remarkable career.

Alice Mary Norton started writing in high school, when she was on the staff of her school newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio. She began her first book in study hall. (Eventually, after extensive revision, it was published as her second book, *Rale-*

Fantasy Figure

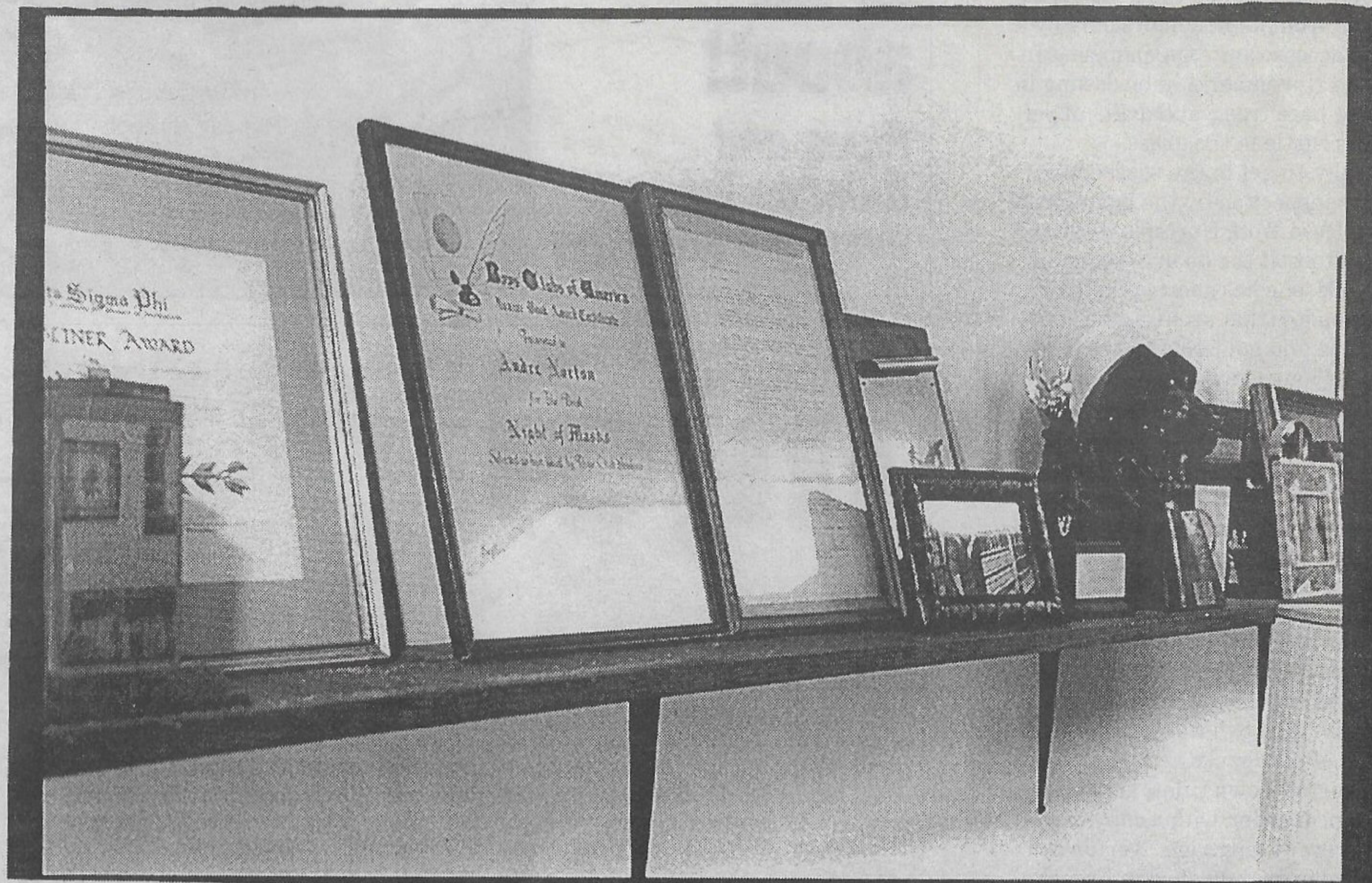
continued from page 25

stone Luck.) Her first published volume, *The Prince Commands*, was sold before she was 21 and published the next year, in 1934. It was the middle of the Depression. Harold Ross was still at *The New Yorker*. Maxwell Perkins was still at Scribner's, helping Thomas Wolfe look homeward. Of Norton's future colleagues, J.R.R. Tolkien had yet to publish *The Hobbit* and Isaac Asimov hadn't started writing.

In those days before agents became the essential conduit to publishers, young Alice Mary Norton simply made an alphabetical list of editors interested in her type of fiction. She sent the manuscript to the first one on the list—and he bought it. (It would be another 25 years before she ever contracted with an agent.) Because she started out writing fantasy and adventure stories—which, like just about everything except child-rearing, were seen as male turf—she chose a male name, and officially became Andre Norton in 1934. Occasionally in the early days she used another pen name, such as Andrew North, for some works.

Nowadays the New York publishing field is in bottom-line-driven chaos, the result of an endless series of buyouts and ax-swinging by multinational corporations that want to sell books the way they sell cars or microprocessors. Not surprisingly, Norton talks nostalgically

The shelves in Norton's home are lined with countless awards.



about the differences between the field now and in her youth. "In the first place, your advance was never over about $1,500, but you got consistent royalties. I had one book that was selling steadily for 25 years." For a moment she can't remember the title. "It was the pirate one…."

"*Scarface*," Wolf provides.

"*Scarface*, yes. You see, the editors themselves all had degrees in literature. Of my early editors, one graduated from Mt. Holyoke and the other from Vassar. So they had good literary backgrounds. Also, there was a better relationship between editors and writers." Norton smiles. "They became usually personal friends. And you could get them any time you called. They were always ready to talk to you. Now there is sort of a shoving off of the writer. I think it destroys both your own self-confidence and your confidence in the person you're working with.

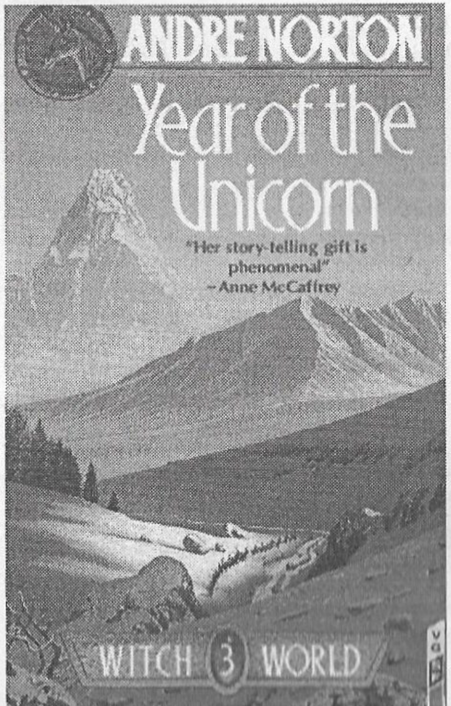
When Norton started out, she says, "There was a better relationship between editors and writers."

"Now listen!" Norton snaps abruptly, addressing a couple of squabbling cats. "We're not going to have fighting in here!" One cat ignores her and the other looks back over its shoulder disdainfully. The author just as quickly returns to her subject: "Nowadays the writer is the last person considered. For example, I found out yesterday that my author's copies of my last book were sent to the wrong address. That's the second time that has happened. The editor no longer follows things through.

continued on page 28

Fantasy Figure

continued from page 27



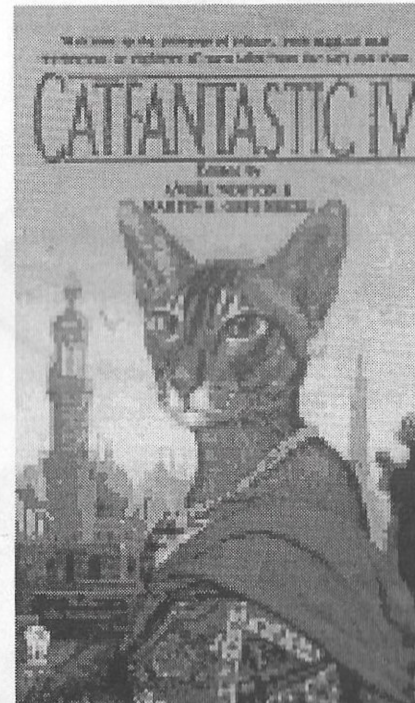
All their energy goes into selling."

Norton doesn't have a favorite book or series among her vast output, which includes not only fantasy and science fiction but also mysteries, adventure stories, and even westerns. "I was always interested in the book I was working on—although I was apt to forget parts when I went on to the next book, especially if it wasn't connected."

She laughs. "I remember once I had lunch in New York with my editor. Another man asked me about a recent book, and I couldn't remember the name of the hero. He said, 'You can't remember the hero of your own book?' And I said, 'Well, that's been three books back!' "

If it sounds like Norton cranked out these books, it's because she has frequently managed to produce more than two books per year. However, usually her research is extensive and in some ways has become more complicated over the years. Before she could write the last Witch World book, which wove together the various stories from the previous 22 volumes, a researcher created a detailed index to all characters, settings, and incidents in the series. "I had to bring into it characters from the earlier books—and I couldn't remember which books they were in. You know, sometimes I can reread one of my early books and not know it at all. I feel that I'm reading somebody else's book."

That Andre Norton now runs a research library is not surprising. She was a children's librarian in Cleveland for two decades, through the '30s and '40s. Her entire life has been devoted to books in one way or

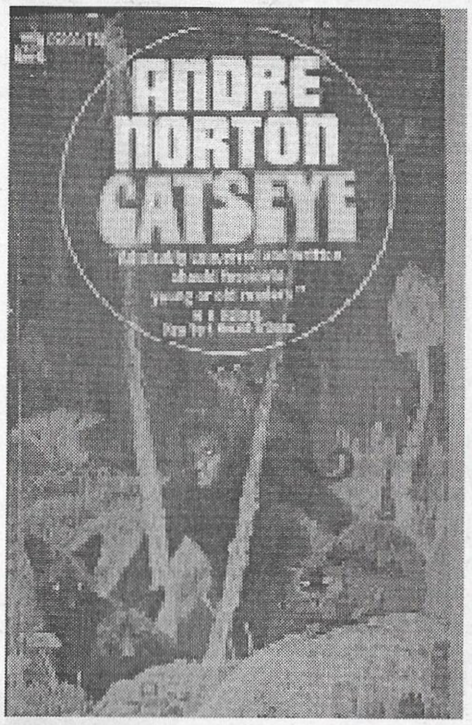


another, including a stint reading manuscripts for the early fantasy and science fiction publisher Gnome Press.

The modest little library is called The High Hallack Genre Writer's Research and Reference Library. The name comes from Norton's celebrated series about the magic-driven planet Witch World, in which High Hallack is the western country along the seacoast. There was a better-suited name from the series, Norton explains, but for the uninitiated it was simply too difficult to pronounce.

As it turns out, High Hallack was a more apt name for the original location of the combined writer's retreat and research library; it was to be situated in the mountains rather than in horizontal Murfreesboro. Norton and Wolf originally left their separate homes in Florida for Tennessee because Norton had purchased several wild acres on the Cumberland Plateau near Cookeville. Unfortunately, the site turned out to be *too* secluded, especially for two women who don't drive, one of whom is elderly. As a result, Norton and Wolf have been in Murfreesboro for three years.

High Hallack is situated in a renovated and enlarged three-bay garage behind the house, and it's covered in tan siding to match the larger structure. Two slanting ramps connect the buildings. From the outside, you would never mistake the building for a library, but the decorations around the entrance give a hint that something strange is afoot. A fanged and winged gargoyle—of a cat, naturally—glares from the wall. The bird feeder in the tree a few feet away is topped with another gargoyle, and the door knocker is the kind of medieval knight figure seen on old tombs and gravestones.

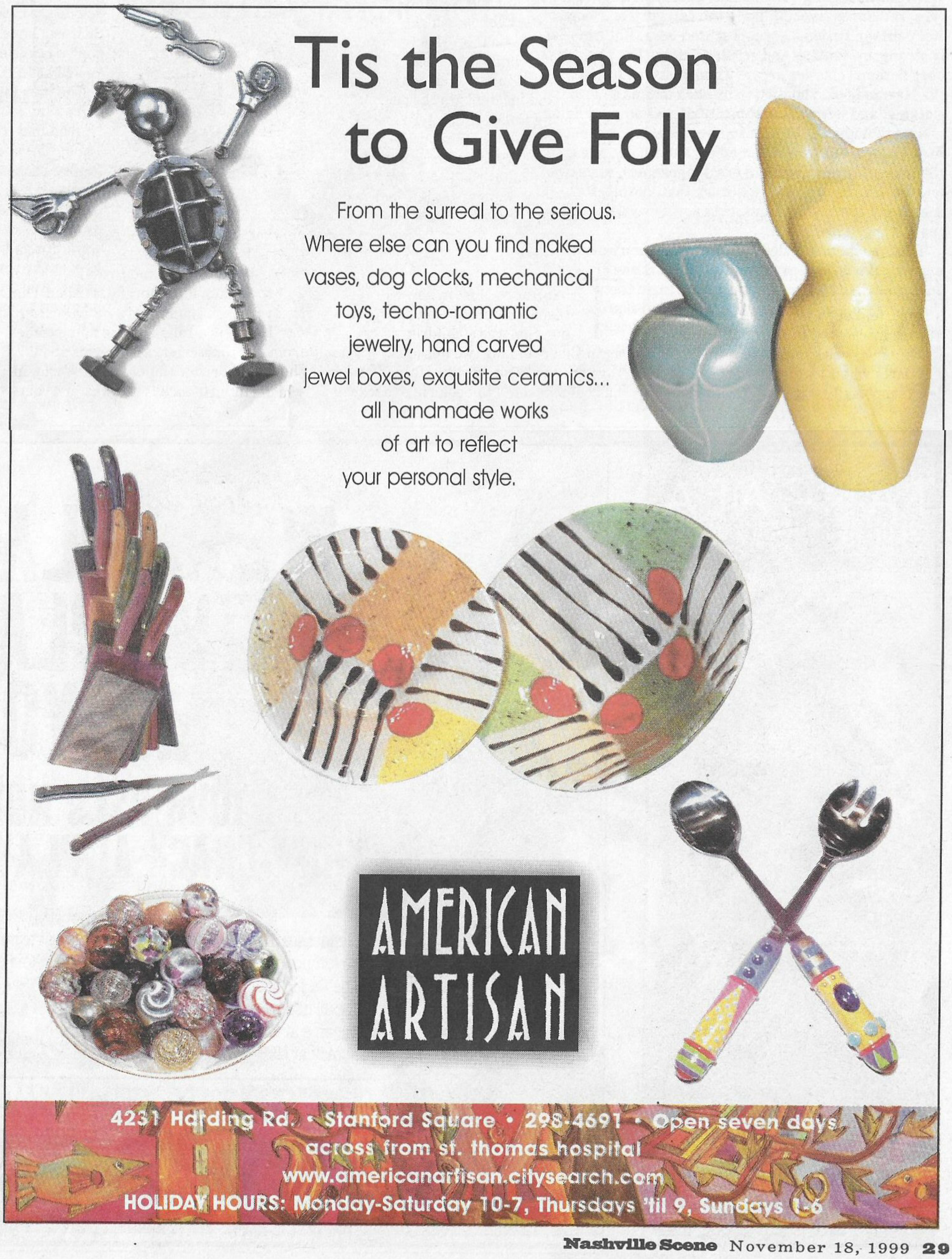


Inside, the former garage has been transformed into what looks like an old-fashioned small-town library. As you open the door, you are greeted first by a slightly musty, invitingly bookish smell. There are dozens of chest-high shelves standing back-to-back in the room and lining the walls. Instantly you're transported back to the childhood shelves where you first discovered Ray Bradbury or Edgar Rice Burroughs, back to the gateways through which you first visited Narnia, Oz, Barsoom—or Witch World.

It doesn't take long to realize that this is a library with a twist. The clock to the right of the computer is shaped like a castle, and the one to the left has its numbers reversed so that you seem to be viewing it from the other side of Alice's looking-glass. A shelf nearby displays long-bearded Merlin and Gandalf wizard figures. The bookends around the room represent every genus and species of gargoyle.

On the walls above the bookshelves are prints and original paintings on science fiction and fantasy themes. With the innocence and slapdash enthusiasm of early science fiction, a not particularly accomplished oil portrays a home-made-looking rocket sitting in a country field. In a print by popular fantasy artist Frank Frazetta, the imperiled (and, of course, extravagantly mammiferous) female has her nipples covered with the tiny pasties that Frazetta employed to keep his book jacket art barely legal. In another nearby, the requisite babe is nude and held aloft by gigantic butterfly wings. We are talking unashamedly popular culture here. Henry James this isn't.

Over one doorway hangs a pair of crossed old brooms, obviously hand-made of twigs. Norton explains that 150 years ago these very brooms were used by Welsh practitioners of Wicca to clear the ground prior to a ceremony. Like the brooms, most of the books on witchcraft and magic were donated to High Hallack by a practicing Wiccan. A couple of scholars donated their entire libraries in other genres. Gradually,



 continued from page 29

thanks to donations and purchases—mostly, because of modest funds, from remainder catalogs—the library has grown from its origin in Norton's own book collection.

It is an appealing place for study. Small high windows admit natural light. There are long writing tables outfitted with wheeled chairs and modern versions of library lamps. A rattan rocker is nearby for more relaxed reading. Although old-fashioned and print-oriented, the library is furnished with a telephone, and a computer with Internet access. A television is available for viewing the collection of videos, which include everything from '30s horror movies to *Star Wars*. High Hallack also subscribes to specialized periodicals that would be of use to genre writers, ranging from *Archaeology* to the science fiction news magazine *Locus*.

All genre writing—mysteries, ghost stories, westerns, romances, everything in the category of escapist story-driven fiction—is represented here. But especially strong are fantasy and science fiction. The shelves bear fictional classics in every genre, from *Dracula* to the Narnia books; nonfiction on such details as jewelry, clothing, and weapons; a substantial section on religion and mythology; books about natural history and nature-based superstitions and remedies; and finally, to capture the tone and minutiae of an era, biographies, memoirs, and diaries. The result is a library that, despite its seemingly specialized focus, cuts a wide swath through the history of literature.

The modest dimensions of the library don't permit more than one copy of each title, which is one reason the books don't circulate; you must read them there. Since the library opened in January 1999, several scholars have come to Murfreesboro to use this specialized resource. One writer in England is seeking grant money to make the trip. Bookshop owners and librarians have visited. One high school writer's group has made three field trips to High Hallack, to visit both the books and the historical resource that is Andre Norton. Still, this sporadic attention doesn't add up to much traffic, and on most days the charming little library is empty.

Despite its seemingly specialized focus, the library cuts a wide swath through the history of literature.

"Ours is not a conventional library," Norton explains—as if its unconventional nature didn't cry out from every direction. For one thing, there is no card catalog and the books are not arranged by Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress cataloguing. "The books are shelved by genre. The only ones that are kept in any order are the books of fiction, and they are kept alphabetically by author.

"When writers are doing research," she adds, "they have a general idea of what they're going to do. But research puts the flesh on the bones. Lots of times you're not aware of just which way you're going to go. So if you have a browsing library, you'll see a book that you've never even heard of that's on your subject. And you can add that to your work."

The idea for the library has been germinating for more than half a century. It came out of an experience Norton had while working on a book of her own in the 1940s. "I was researching in the Library of Congress for the background of my historical novel *Follow the Drum*. When you worked in the Library of Congress back then, the only thing you had to work with were drawers of card catalogs. But I always felt that there were things I could have done if I'd been able to go and look at the shelves—books that I didn't know anything about. And from that day on, I felt that writers should be given a chance to actually see shelves on which were the things in their genre. For example, I had a person in here who wanted to find out what sort of rifles—well, long-range firearms—they had in the early 1700s. She came here, and I have a book on the evolution of rifles."

Or take a matter such as costume, which is critical for a historical novelist. Capturing seemingly minor details correctly, Norton argues, can make the difference between a convincing period recreation and a second-rate piece of writing. "For a long time," she explains, "the underclothes of a woman existed only as a chemise and several petticoats. It wasn't until the 1840s that they developed drawers. It's little things like that that you come across. I had to rewrite a page in a book once because I had the men's shirts buttoning down the front in 1869—and they didn't do that until 1872."

Not surprisingly, Norton has little patience with writers who don't do their historical research. She laughs and tells the story of a book she read in which the author allowed a character in 1808 to take a train to Malta. That the author didn't know there were no trains in 1808 was bad enough, but that he didn't know Malta is an island was ludicrous. This leads Norton to espouse one of her several manifestoes about an author's responsibility to her readers: "The trouble, with the majority of younger readers today, is that they have no historical background. They have to get it from your books, and if they get it wrong, it's your fault."

For some time now, Norton has received high praise from feminist critics for quietly writing about strong female characters, and for analyzing societies from female points of view, long before such attitudes became politically correct. Indeed, although she has written about a variety of prejudices that hamper the efforts of her heroines and heroes, she has also innocently imagined times in which those biases will have vanished.

In her novel *Star Guard*, she writes: "Racial mixtures after planet-wide wars, mutant births after the atomic conflicts, had broken down the old intolerance against the 'different.' And out in space thousands of intelligent life forms, encased in almost as many shapes and bodies, had given 'shape prejudice' its final blow." It's understandable why it would take the genre of science fiction—which is limited in scope only by the cosmos and the future—to make room for Norton's optimistic view of age-old conflicts back home on Earth.

But for all her noble and forward-thinking ideas, Norton's goal is not to analyze society. "It has never been my intention to do more than tell a story," she writes in the preface to a recent bibliography of her work, "for it is my firm belief that that is the one and ONLY reason for writing fiction." Joyce and Proust might argue the point, but she is comfortable with it. She writes elsewhere, "If one can provide even an hour of escape for someone who is worried, frustrated, unhappy—then that is an award indeed and that is what I have aimed to do."

That is what genre fiction in general aims to do. Detective stories reassure us that there is an order to the world and that misdeeds are punished. Westerns imply nostalgically clear definitions of masculinity and heroism. Romances provide escape from the stifling boredom of too many real lives. And science fiction and fantasy transcend the limitations of space, time, and a mortal and relatively powerless body.

Norton's love of story is apparent in her passion for history. She talks about the past not in terms of royal reigns or social movements, but in terms of narrative. "History, unfortunately, is usually presented in battles, in dates, and in changes of government. It isn't *people*."

Inevitably, Norton's focus on people extends to her fiction. For all the trappings of spaceships and aliens, of witches and clairvoyant animals, the stories are about people—frequently young ones, which is one reason why teenagers devour her work. The characters wrestle with social and family problems, with flaws and shortcomings. What makes Norton's work old-fashioned—besides the minor violence and lack of explicit sexuality—is her determination that her characters will learn from their experiences and, ultimately, triumph over them.

Is Norton an artist? As always, such a question is debatable, but she is definitely not a serious literary writer. She has been happily reading genre fiction all her life, and has been happily writing it for 65 years. Energy and enthusiasm define her personality. Her mind never seems to rest. She can discuss any era and culture that you mention, with names and dates falling into place without a moment's hesitation.

As she reminisces about the writers she has known—Isaac Asimov, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Robert Heinlein, and countless others—her eyes light up, and she laughs as yet another anecdote occurs to her. You realize that Andre Norton is a woman who is doing exactly what she wants to do, and has been doing so for a very long time. It's difficult to imagine a better definition of success. ■

High Hallack is a nonprofit institution, and donations of books or money are tax-deductible. People wishing to donate books should check with Norton first, to make sure the library doesn't already have copies. The e-mail address is highhallack@mindspring.com.