

A Sense of Story

**Essays on Contemporary
Writers for Children**

by

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Andre Norton

Andre Norton was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and worked for a number of years in the Cleveland Public Library as a children's librarian. During World War II she worked as a special librarian for a citizenship project in Washington, D.C., and at the Library of Congress. In addition she was at one time manager of a bookstore.

*During and after the war Miss Norton wrote a number of historical novels. Since 1952 she has produced mainly science fiction. She became a full-time writer in 1952, the year in which her first science fiction novel, *Star Man's Son*, was published. Many science fiction adventures have followed, as well as historical novels and fantasies.*

Andre Norton is a prolific writer who has produced more than sixty books, latterly at the rate of three or four a year. Her work includes stories, science fiction, historical novels and fantasy, but she is best known—and in England almost entirely known—as a science fiction writer. That is the side of her work which will be dealt with here. None of Miss Norton's historical novels is in print in England at the time of writing. Three fantasies—*Steel Magic* (1965), *Octagon Magic* (1967) and *Fur Magic* (1968)—have been published both in the United States and Britain. Although the fantasies and historical stories have merit, it seems to me that the science fiction is the most interesting part of her work and the basis of her reputation.

Miss Norton's science fiction books are, in the main, 'space opera': stories of galactic and inter-galactic adventure. This is the category of science fiction which is least likely to be found acceptable by the literati. Space opera is associated with pulp magazines, and is apt to be written off on superficial inspection as wild, undisciplined stuff, all about clashing fleets of spaceships,

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battles with bug-eyed monsters, death and destruction by ray-gun: action of meaningless violence in settings which are spatially enormous but imaginatively minute. Andre Norton has used the standard ingredients of space opera without undue inhibition, but they are not the be-all and end-all of her work. The sheer size of her world, which is infinitely extended in time and space, and in which nothing is outside the bounds of possibility, is matched by the size of the themes she tackles. She has had her artistic failures—quite a number of them—but she has had her successes, too.

She is a highly professional writer, and has always paid full attention to the need to hold the reader, including the young reader who is simply in it for the story. Incident follows incident, sometimes coming so thick and fast as to obscure the main line of the plot. But there is always something beyond the immediate action to be reached for and thought about. Miss Norton's sources of inspiration include Greek and Roman history as well as archaeology and anthropology, myth and folklore. She is not much interested in science-for-science's-sake, and obviously has a strong awareness of the menace of uncontrolled or miscontrolled technological development. One subject which deeply interests her and which occurs again and again is telepathy, often as a means of communication between man and animal. She is also fascinated by mutations and new forms of life, although she does not seem to me to have overcome the problem imposed by the limits of human imagination: we cannot conceive of *really* new forms of life, we tend to think of variations on forms we know, and the result is often boring.

Miss Norton's books have not been published in England in the order in which they were written. Her first science fiction stories—though they were by no means her first novels—were the four 'Star' books: *Star Man's Son*, *Star Rangers*, *Star Guard*, and *Star Gate*. The title of *Star Man's Son* (1952) sounds like that of a sequel, but it is not. It is a fairly straightforward story, set in a post-cataclysmic world—our own—where a few small communities survive in a primitive way, and in which the hero sets out to look for a lost city which is rumoured to be safe from radiation. The Norton interest in telepathy and mutation is already present; the hero is himself a mutant and has a

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telepathic relationship with a giant cat; but the book does not have the range and imaginative power of later ones.

The other three 'Star' books, while all set in the future, have classical associations. A foreword to *Star Rangers* (1953) refers to the legend of the Roman Emperor who simultaneously demonstrated his absolute power and the loyalty of his legions by sending one of them to march to the end of the world. The legion duly set out eastward into Asia and was never heard of again. Miss Norton's book looks many thousands of years ahead to the declining years of a kind of galactic Roman Empire, in which a stellar patrol of men loyal to service tradition and discipline is sent on a fool's errand in an ill-maintained ship to a forgotten corner of the galaxy. This is a big advance on Miss Norton's first

and certainly the one I would recommend for sampling. Apart from the Roman analogy, her interest in telepathy is developed: there are now 'sensitives' at different levels on the scale of extra-sensory perception, and, at one point, a literal battle of wills is described with some success. An unexpected twist at the end comes when the forgotten planet turns out to be Terra, or Earth, from which space colonization began many thousands of years ago, and on which a new start now appears to be possible. A curious minor detail is the use of broken-down surnames of today for several characters: Jaksan, Smitt, Kartr.

The third book, *Star Guard* (1955), is also based on a Roman Empire situation—in this case a decadent central power-structure trying to hold down vigorous barbarians from Earth—but its main action, the retreat of a legion, has a Greek source, for it is in effect a retelling of the *Anabasis* of Xenophon. The fourth, *Star Gate* (1958), begins with the withdrawal of the wise and great Star Lords from a planet which they have raised from savagery to a feudal civilization. Although this hints at the departure of the legions, the feeling of the story is medieval. And the philosophic interest is something different again. It lies in an exploration of time theory: could there be a parallel world, also existing 'now', in which things have developed differently? The assumption is made that there could; and the 'star gate' is a device for transposing into and out of it. (Incidentally, if time is a single straight line is the fourth dimension, then a time in

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which parallel developments could take place would require a fifth dimension, that of space-in-time. Miss Norton's field of speculation is wide indeed.) But although Andre Norton is prepared to mix the remote past with the distant future and the might-have-been, her action has to be on a comprehensible human scale, and tends to take place on a reasonably familiar-seeming earth-type planet on which people can move and breathe as we do. The hero of *The Beast Master* (1959) and its sequel *Lord of Thunder* (1962) is, by ancestry, a Navajo Indian, and although he lives at a time when this earth has been reduced to a blue radioactive cinder, the territory he inhabits on another planet is remarkably like the American West.

Of the later Norton science fiction books, which cannot all be discussed in this small amount of space, the most imaginative, though not the most successful, is *Judgment on Janus* (1963), in which the hero finds himself drawn through inward change into membership of an infinitely-remote, green-skinned tree people. There is a sequel, *Victory on Janus* (1966), from which come these reflections as the hero lies on the rich soil of a woodland glade:

Iftsga, Iftcan—the home Forest—his mind kept returning to the green there. Spring, and the rise of renewing sap—the awakening of Iftin bodies. Summer, with the long, beautiful nights for hunting, for living. Fall, with the last securing of the Crowns, the coming of the need for sleep. Winter, when one's body was cradled safe within one of the Great Crowns, one's mind travelling—travelling through dreams.

Obviously ventures like this are perilous; a momentary lapse can cause not only loss of credibility but an irretrievable tumble into the comic. And, in fact, the blending in these two books of space technology with the myth-infused forest world of the Iftin does not come off. Too often it produces a result which, instead of the intended dramatic clash, is simply a ludicrous inappropriateness.

The value of old ways of life, of the simple and natural against the sophisticated, artificial and ever-changing, is a frequent issue in Miss Norton's work. It may seem odd to compare her with

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Rosemary Sutcliff, but there are curious correspondences. Miss Norton, as the Roman references may already have suggested, is concerned with civilization under the threat of barbarism; but there is also a part of her which sees that civilization is not all, which is deeply aware of instinctual life, is conscious of the rooting of myth in the cycle of life and death, the turning of the seasons. This is true of Miss Sutcliff, too. It is not a contradiction but a proper ambiguity which perhaps is unavoidable in people who both think and feel. And for all their vast spans of time and distance, the Norton novels can often appear to be bounded in a nutshell as well as free of infinite space, for—as in the Janus books—the conflict of tree people with advanced technology may be seen as the externalization of an inner struggle.

far, and it draws together most of her enduring themes. In some ways it shows her at her most Roman. The setting is Beltane, an earthlike but little-populated planet housing a small colony of scientists. It has been a backwater during a ten-year inter-galactic war. Now order has broken down and there are piratical bands roaming the skies, ready to take over such outposts and exterminate the inhabitants, as indeed they do on Beltane. But a group of children and young people have been taken to an underground refuge by the far-seeing veteran Griss Lugard. Although he dies, they survive entombment, perils with mutant animals, and plague, and they can continue as the tiny handful of people left alive on an abandoned planet. It is a sombre story, involving the illness and death of a child as well as Lugard's death, and the narrator's conclusion is not too hopeful:

We realize that those of our small colony coming after us will slip farther and farther down the ladder of civilization, perhaps, in time, to meet others climbing up.

The latter phrase is a reference to the planet's mutant creatures, unaffected by the plague which has killed all humans except the group of children. The piper of the title is Lugard, whose playing enchants birds, beasts and people. Clearly he is a latter-day Pied Piper, though the resemblance is not pushed.

Miss Norton's science fiction books are mainly written in a hard, dry, somewhat impersonal style. Her heroes are young,

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determined, often afraid but overcoming their fears. They are not characterized in depth, and appear to be blanks for the reader to fill. In the earlier books there are no girls; in the Janus stories there is the forest maiden Illylle, but there is little about her that is flesh and blood. Commonly the heroes are unrooted 'loners' without family or friends, though they make comrades in the course of the action. *Dark Piper* is an exception to nearly all these generalizations. It is a first-person narration, which gives greater immediacy than usual. The children are seen both as distinct individuals and in relationship to the group; and there are real, three-dimensional girl characters in the strong-minded, protective Annet and imaginative Gytha.

Miss Norton handles her gadgetry with great aplomb. She never draws special attention to it; it is simply there. Spaceships are as ordinary as buses. Flitters for moving around in; stunners and blasters and flamers for dealing with your enemies; and 'coms' of all kinds for getting in touch with people are, with countless other devices, casually mentioned in passing without any nudge to the reader. Just occasionally the effects of word-coinage are odd—'he spooned up some lorg sauce and spread it neatly over a horva fritter'—but on the whole this is one of Miss Norton's minor strengths. Few writers are better than she is at inventing things and giving names to them. A more important power, which should not be underrated, is that of telling strong, fast-moving stories.

The Norton universe on the whole is an alarming and hostile one. It is assumed that for thousands of years hence there will be

Prosperity appears in an unpleasing form on the 'pleasure planet' Korwar, which also houses an intergalactic slum called the Dipple. Corruption and injustice are always around. Nature is red in tooth and claw; man in flamer and blaster. In terms of organized society there seems little to look forward to. It could be of course that strife and confusion are externalized from inner states; divided men who war within themselves will form divided, warring communities; and it is not realistic to expect sudden improvements in human nature.

Miss Norton offers no false comfort in a harsh world. In most of her novels it is quite a triumph even to stay alive. Yet the

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atmosphere is by no means one of despair. There is always the hope of private happiness, private fulfilment (to be found, as in *Catseye*, in the wild rather than the city), and the development of new faculties, new forms of sympathy and awareness.

Andre Norton writes:

I began writing seriously when I was about sixteen and was on the staff of our high school newspaper. We had a small creative writing class meeting in our own time under an inspired teacher. I was then writing mystery serials, World War I adventure stories and the like. While still in high school I began my first book—a teenage mystery. Eventually after much revision it became my second book to be published. I went to college for a time; then the Depression hit and I left to work in the public library, writing on the side. My mother encouraged me greatly, proof-reading and criticizing my MSS. My first book, a romance set in a mythical kingdom, was published before I was twenty-one.

At the outbreak of World War II, I was asked to write a book for young people on the Underground in Holland; this later earned a plaque from the Netherlands Government. It also led eventually to my best publishing contact. Up to 1950 I wrote historical, mystery and adventure stories. Since 1951 I have been writing mainly science fiction. I like writing fantasy and science fiction because the imagination is allowed full play and

allowed.

I do a great deal of research for each book, having an extensive personal library to draw upon. Folklore, natural history, history, archaeology, anthropology, native religions etc all go into my background reading. I try to get material into a book which will make the reader want to know more about some subject introduced and perhaps do some extra reading of his own thereafter. Writing down is the one thing I abhor. If the story is exciting enough the reader will 'reach' to read it. My public ranges in age from ten to eighty-five, to judge by comments in fan mail.

Uncertain health keeps me very much at my home in Florida.

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I have always loved reading and for a while delighted in needle-work, although that is now ruled out because of my eyesight. I am owned and operated—to their advantage—by five cats, who certainly do not allow me to vegetate.

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