

AN OPEN LETTER TO ANDRE NORTON

Dear Andre Norton,

This is a kind of love letter, and I've owed it to you for fifteen years---ever since I came home from the Mayfair Market with your Storm over Warlock one day when I was in junior high. When I read the description on the back cover, I didn't even know what a Terran was--but by the time I'd read the whole book I didn't want to read anything else but science fiction. It was like finding the key to the universe, and although it probably sounds corny, it changed my whole life.

It wasn't until I'd read several of your books that I found one with a biography that gave away the secret that your real name was Alice Mary, and that you were actually a woman. It never occurred to me then to wonder why you needed to use a male pseudonym, but--also without really wondering why--I was thrilled and excited to learn the truth. Because you were a woman you suddenly seemed very real to me: a person, as well as an Author. I lay awake nights composing letters to you in my mind, and trying to imagine what you were like....

I knew from the biographical notes in your books that you were a native of Cleveland Ohio, like my mother; that you had been a children's librarian there, and later worked for the Library of Congress; that you had also been an editor of young people's science fiction at Gnome Press before you became a full-time writer (and moved to Florida). I also learned that you had published your first book before you were 21,

and had written a lot of novels--though at the time I had no idea of how many: I used to be afraid that someday I'd have read them all, and there'd be nothing left to look forward to. But you've been writing for about thirty years now, and I'm still discovering books I never even knew about. Just the collection I have at home contains at least fifty books, including a title for every letter of the alphabet (from An-droid at Arms to The Zero Stone). You've explored (and explained to me) every imaginable science fiction theme over the years, from psionics to parallel worlds, from interstellar travel to time travel. You've also gradually developed a complex future history that weaves your science fiction novels into one large panorama; and a fantasy other-world for your Witch World novels. Almost all your stories beg for a sequel, and in many cases you have actually written them, letting the reader meet old friends again, or sometimes their sons and daughters.

You've used your experience as a librarian to find unusual source material on a tremendous range of subjects, and make it into stories; not only science fiction novels like The Time Traders, which combined extraterrestrials with Bronze Age Britons, but also historical novels like Scarface (which strips the glamor from Caribbean piracy, and still makes the reader love every minute of it), mysteries and spy novels, westerns... and recently gothics, a large number of ^{adult} fantasies; and children's books--beautiful fantasies and science fiction like Lavender-Green Magic and Outside that are in no sense 'childish'.

When I feel fed up with the world or like people are just no damn good, I like to sit and reread some of my favorite novels by you, because they always end up making me feel good. One of the reasons that they do is your ability to create another world, or time and place, that's so tangible and sense-stimulating I can step into the transporter or through the looking glass and be there...on Warlock, where the skies are hazy amber and the flora glows with phosphorescence at night--where I stand watching leather-winged clak-claks drifting above the cliffs, or gaze out across a storm-wracked beach toward a chain of ragged islands adrift on sea-fog....Or on Dis, whose sun is infrared and whose seas have boiled away--where only special goggles can penetrate the suffocating, humid utter blackness, and show to human eyes the degenerate life-forms that survive there, the nightmare creatures that don't disappear when the lights come on....Or in the British Isles, wearing the copper armband of a Beaker trader and singing a song that won't make the charts for four thousand years--meeting a priestess of the Earth Mother, who materializes out of the sun-shafted morning mist to stand between menhirs of stone in the quiet forest....

Written in a clean straightforward prose that never gets in the way of its images, your adventures catch the illusive "sense of wonder" that sets good science fiction apart from all other kinds of fiction, and makes a fan into a willing addict.

But escaping to another world doesn't guarantee a pleasant trip unless the fellow-travellers are ones a reader can

like and relate to. Science fiction is a field where too often the characters have been cardboard cutouts pushed around the landscape to move the plot along. You have always tried to make your characters individuals, giving them an identity to start from and a place to grow to. Usually the problems they face are not only those of coping with an unknown planet or hostile aliens, but also the overcoming of very real personal and social handicaps. And yet, in the face of all the obstacles that are thrown against them, they retain a basic decency and kindness that makes the reader care about them, and want things to come out right for them: Shann Lantee, whose life had been a struggle for survival on the bleak mining world of Tyr; who saw his hope of something better--of belonging, even as a menial worker, to a Survey team--destroyed when their camp was wiped out by attacking aliens, leaving him stranded on an unexplored world....Holly Wade, a young black girl whose father was missing in action in Vietnam, who was suddenly uprooted from her home in Boston when her mother found a job--one that meant she and her brother and sister had to stay with their grandparents in a town where she was painfully aware of being "different"; and where her conflicting emotions drew her into the power struggle between two witch sisters, one good and one evil, who had lived in the town's colonial past....Nik Kolherne, who had been an outcast even among outcasts because of his terribly scarred face; who agreed to help the interplanetary Thieves Guild in a kidnapping in return for expensive plastic surgery--and then found that he might lose his new face, or even his life, when he was forced

to defy the Guild to save the kidnapped boy's life.

The fact that your protagonists are often life's underdogs--the abandoned, the friendless, the outsiders who are "aliens" among their own kind--is probably a part of what makes your work so popular with young adult readers: At the age when the average person feels the most misunderstood, oppressed, or uncertain about the future, it's a comfort and a relief to meet a character with similar troubles--and one who is eventually able to surmount not only the situation's physical dangers, but also the painful difficulties of communication, of proving their own worth and independence to a doubting superior or an indifferent universe.

Your obvious compassion for your protagonists, and their humanity toward others, helps reinforce the feeling that the reader too will eventually win through life's trials--and more importantly, that its rewards and goals can be attained by sensible and honorable means. (The encouragement and reassurance that belief gives to a reader are not limited to young adults, either.) The quiet moral values your stories have taught me have always been strong, positive ones, and it's easy to believe that you hold them all yourself.

You also taught me, at an important time in my life, to try to see all people as equals and individuals, no matter what their race (or sex) happened to be. At a time when the average cast of a science fiction story was strictly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, you followed the unusual course of including important characters who were members of minority groups, in stories like Star Man's Son: 2250 AD and the "Solar Queen" series. And

you followed the even more uncommon course of having heroes who were not 'All-American' blue-eyed blonds--like Travis Fox, the American Indian hero of Galactic Derelict; Shann Lantee of Storm over Warlock, a kind of 'Heinz 57' of humanity; Kincar S'Rudd of Star Gate, who was half alien. As science fiction writers, and Americans in general, have become more sensitive to the value of ~~all~~ the different cultural backgrounds that exist in the United States--and the world--you have continued to be one of the strongest supporters of the movement.

Your alien characters have been equally varied, ranging from the feline Salarikis to the benign, reptilian Zacathans, and the vicious insectoid Throgs, whose thought processes seem to have no real common ground with humanity's. But your specialty--and probably one of the things my friends and I have always liked the most--is your treatment of relationships between human and animals, particularly cats. The telepathic rapport between human and animal sensitives in stories, ^{like} Catseye gives the reader, like the protagonist, a chance to experience the world with the heightened senses of a cat, a fox, a wolverine, or an alien creature like Harath in Forerunner Foray... and to trace the alien windings of their un-human thought patterns. Their human-animal rapport communicates your own love for animals--and for all of nature--with a kind of telepathy to anyone who reads your novels.

But for me probably the most important 'cause' that you've supported in your writing has been that of the equality of women. Simply by succeeding so well in the "no-woman's land" of science fiction writing, you've been a role model over the

years to my friends and me, even before we ever thought about the significance of having one. (One of the tired cliches of science fiction has been that women not only don't write science fiction, but they don't even read it. And yet all of my closest friends are long-time science fiction fans, who discovered it independently...and some of their mothers admit to reading brother's pulp magazines on the sly, when they were girls.)

And, in a field where the women characters in stories have commonly been Barbie-doll sex objects and witless ninnies, you have never had a single female character who would make a reader ashamed to be a woman. In the 1950's and early 60's, when no publisher would have touched a science fiction story with a female protagonist, and the readers were reluctant to accept women in non-stereotyped roles, you wrote--consciously or unconsciously--stories with essentially all-male casts, that avoided demeaning portrayals of women. The women who did appear in the stories were not compromised, but were capable and dignified human beings, like the woman chief of the Plainsmen in Star Man's Son, and Lady Asgar in Star Gate. In Storm over Warlock and its sequel, Ordeal in Otherwhere, the portrayal of the Wyverns, an alien matriarchy, was both exotic and realistic without the grotesque pseudo-Amazonian trappings that male interpretations generally gave to female dominance.

Ordeal in Otherwhere had the added distinction of being the first of your books I had read to actually have a female protagonist. I had never had any trouble identifying with male characters in science fiction novels, simply because so few women existed (and the men had all the fun, anyway). But

I'd always treasured the few spunky women I ran across, and to have one as a main character--someone I could identify with 100 %--was total joy. Ordeal in Otherwhere was published in 1964, well before the women's movement had begun to make us all aware of the shackles of double standard that weighed down our lives--but Charis Nordholm, the heroine, was a fully liberated woman, who came from a world where sexual equality was the enlightened norm. She was competent, resourceful, brave, and empathetic, and she faced dangers with the story's hero and their animal allies as a complete equal. Probably only someone with your popularity as a science fiction writer could have gotten away with it, at that early date.

Since then, men and women have generally shared both the adventure and center-stage in your novels, often taking turns as the viewpoint character for the story. In Forerunner Foray, one of your more recent novels, the heroine Ziantha not only lives one life as a human sensitive used by the criminal underworld of the Guild, but shares a mental bond with an unknown male sensitive, and becomes two women long dead--Vintra, a humanoid rebel leader, and D'Eyree, an amphibian alien struggling to save her civilization from destruction. Your recent novels written for pre-teens also feature strong heroines along with, or instead of, boys, giving younger girls someone to identify with as well.

A lot has been written in the last few years about the importance of providing role models that show girls and women that the only bounds on their futures are--or should be--ones

they set for themselves. And I realized, recently, that I could trace the importance of how my reading had affected the way my own life turned out: All of the most important things in my life right now--my writing, my husband, my interest in science fiction and anthropology--are directly or indirectly the result of how much I loved your stories while I was growing up. Storm over Warlock started my addiction to science fiction, and science fiction--especially yours--started me writing stories of my own as an escape from the mundane agonies of high school. In college my fascination with the Beaker culture in The Time Traders made me enroll in a European prehistory class, and I wound up majoring in anthropology. And while I was in college I took a science fiction literature class, where I met my husband Vernor, who was already a professional science fiction writer ~~himself~~....Back when I first discovered that you were a woman writer, my own dreams weren't nearly big enough for me to imagine that I'd ever be able to achieve that ultimate goal for myself...but over the years your stories fed my dreams, and kept them growing, and in the end I did--

Because of you, I am.

Thank you very much!

Joan D. Vinge

Joan D. Vinge

(I did write a long-owed letter of appreciation to Andre Norton, two years ago...and got a very nice letter in return, from one very fine lady.)