

she will be painfully missed. Nevertheless, her spirit will live on in her books . . . and other places, of course. Her books are the children of her mind, and they're running around all over the world causing mischief and joy and spreading plenty of black fairy dust.

CELEBRATING THE ALIEN: THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SPECIES IN THE JUVENILES OF ANDRE NORTON

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I began reading science fiction as a fourth-grader at Chancellor Avenue school in Newark, New Jersey. It was the mid-1960s, and I just happened to be the type to prefer the school library to the school yard during recess. I had already finished off Andrew Lang's Red, Pink, Green, and Grey Fairy Book section, plowed through the three-foot shelf of Greek and Roman myths, tackled Homer's two epics, and taken a hopeful stab at two somehow unsatisfying collections of American Indian and African folktales. I remember being both surprised and enlightened by how honest myths tended to be about the adult realities of sex and violence. Even fairy tales suggested that the world was a strange, often cruel, and dangerous place—information that my contextual reality (which included an often bloody Civil Rights struggle, frequent Cold War bomb scares, and high-profile political assassinations) merely confirmed. Then I discovered SF. Our school library was better than average: chockablock full of what was called "young adult" fiction, which included the juvenile SF of Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Andre Norton.

Of all the books I read before entering high school, the only ones to convince me of the utter malleability of the future were science fiction. Even *dystopian* SF stories were thought experiments based on

trying to imagine a future untainted by our congenitally troubled present and past. I got that. I understood the veiled critiques of present-day human behavior couched in the best of these books, which were steeped in sardonic disdain for human hypocrisy. And I quickly recognized that Heinlein and Norton were both better at these kinds of critiques than Asimov. But what Norton did better than Heinlein, in my preadolescent opinion, was place women and non-white characters in central roles.

It's also important to note that for the thousands of kids who encountered Andre Norton in the 1960s like I did, there was no question that "Andre" was male. Back then, as far as the publishing world was concerned, the most authoritative voice in the kinds of genre fiction Norton liked to write was a male voice. So many female authors used initials or took male pseudonyms to appropriate that authority for their own work. Alice Mary Norton began publishing as Andre Norton in 1934, and that same year legally changed her name to Andre Alice Norton. For impressionable youngsters taken in by this standard marketing tactic, it really mattered that this *male writer*, this *white male writer*, Andre Norton, demonstrated a soft spot for women, telepathic animals, oppressed racial minorities, and "half-breed" combinations of all three in the form of witchy, shape-shifting aliens. It also mattered that this putatively white male writer saw technology and magic as two sides of the same coin, and was smart enough to explore and exalt the science in magic as well as the magic in science.

Alice Mary Norton was born in the relatively liberal city of Cleveland, Ohio, in 1912. The late-born second daughter of a local rug merchant, hers was a fairly enlightened, middle-class upbringing where weekly trips to the library and a supportive, intellectually inclined mother opened Norton's mind to the broad range of ideas and possibilities later explored in her novels.

The first Norton book I discovered was *The Beast Master*, originally published in 1959. Despite several subsequent film and series-television rip-offs of this classic work, no one but the creator of the literary franchise was brave enough to make her titular protagonist non-white.

Hosteen Storm, the protagonist of *The Beast Master* and its 1962 sequel *Lord of Thunder*, was not only created as a full-blood Navajo, but he was also envisioned by Norton as the holder of traditional shamanic powers and one of a handful of native Terrans still alive after the destruction of earth in a disastrous interstellar war. At the height of xenophobic Cold War paranoia and postcolonial struggles all over the globe in which non-white peoples struggled to free themselves from both white racism and exploitative European domination, Andre Norton imagined a future where one of the few terrestrial humans left alive was from a non-white racial group once on a fast track to extinction courtesy of invading whites back in the 1800s.

Boy, was I impressed! First of all, I'd hitherto encountered little or nothing in the way of adventure stories about heroic, supernaturally endowed Indians functioning as central characters in a "modern" multicultural world. Not even in Westerns. Secondly, unlike adventure writers like Edgar Rice Burroughs and H. Rider Haggard—whom Norton cites as early influences—Andre clearly admires non-white cultures. Hosteen Storm possesses many different skill sets, but in the end those skills that come from his Navajo background are shown to be more important and useful than anything derived exclusively from the white world. With the *Beast Master* tales Norton did her homework, and incorporated translated excerpts of "The Night Chant," one of the most beautiful ritual poems in American Indian literature, which introduced a generation of American children to the sophisticated concepts behind Navajo healing ceremonies.

Was I disappointed as a black American girl that Norton chose to work with Indian characters rather than black ones? Actually no. Back then, black issues were constantly in the news. Moreover, the publishing world had begun to release a flood of autobiographical books by hyphenated Americans, with particular attention paid to color politics within the black and Latino communities. Yet there was no equivalent high-profile coverage of America's Indian populations, hidden and largely forgotten on their reservations, consigned to a kind of mythic history, like the unicorn. In my opinion, Norton was fighting a single-handed civil-rights struggle for the American

Indian, using her imagination and sense of historical fair play to guarantee them a future.

The protagonist of "The Sioux Spaceman" (1960) and the Apache time travelers and astronauts of books like *The Defiant Agents* (1962) and *Key Out of Time* (1963) were very easy for me to identify with. Norton gave them unequivocally dark skin color, and deliberately chose representatives of those tribes who offered the fiercest physical and/or cultural resistance to white domination. What's not to like about all that? Had Andre Norton used black American characters to make the same points, she might have fallen grievously afoul of the racial sensitivities of the time and not gotten her books published at all. Those of us willing and able to read between the lines (so to speak) could recognize in Norton's Amerindian characters the archetypal Defiant Non-White Hero, just as able to mirror some young Vietnamese or tribal South African child as a black American kid.

Norton telegraphed her xenophilia early on. In the demi-Gothic adventure *Ralestone Luck*, a first novel written while Norton was still in high school (but published as her *second* book about a decade later), the central premise is the search for a 700-year-old family heirloom brought back from the Crusades by a British ancestor to preserve magically the good fortune of all his descendants. Norton is quite specific as to the heirloom's provenance; it is a "lucky" sword, forged out of two older Middle Eastern weapons and crafted according to the specific advice of an Arab alchemist/astrologer. Far from imagining medieval Arab culture and esoteric knowledge as evil, barbaric, and in thrall to unwholesome Powers—as ur-fantastist H. P. Lovecraft did with his widely influential Cthulu myths—Norton chose to acknowledge the frequently superior knowledge and abilities of the non-white, non-Western Other.

Further, this lifelong history buff chose to set her first novel in New Orleans, where Norton could indulge her fascination with historical intersections among Cajun, Creole, white, black, rich, and poor folk in their various, ever-shifting class and caste configurations. Although the blacks in *Ralestone Luck* (published in 1938) speak the local patois and function largely as paid servants and tenant farmers,

they are never deprived of ambition, honesty, self-esteem, or intelligence. Nor does Norton choose to disrespect the "poor white swamp-trash" character Jeems, who speaks French as well as the English patois of the blacks and turns out to be a lost relative of the fallen Ralestone nobles as well. Throughout this book the young Norton's class analysis is surprisingly acute and unromantic. Her European nobles rose to power via war, murder, strategic piracy, and pillage; "good" family trees frequently produced bad seeds; and neither wealth nor social standing becomes any definitive measure of either talent or virtue. These points of view were doubtlessly influenced by Norton's own changing fortunes during the Depression, which forced her to quit college in 1931 after only one year and to write on the side while working full time in the Cleveland library system.

In many of her earliest books, Norton wrote historical fiction and adventure fantasy as a way of time-traveling to places in history she thought particularly intriguing or underexplored in young adult fiction. By the 1940s and 1950s the notion of time travel became one of her favorite points of entry into hard SF. By combining key elements from six thousand or so years of human seafaring lore with the notion of time travel, Norton began developing an approach to space opera that incorporated both the mercantile impetus of the ancient Phoenician fleets and the imperialistic flavor of the Portuguese "voyages of discovery." But she wasn't above playfully inverting the conventional iconography of space and time travel in a relative universe for the amusement of her brighter young fans. Within her popular *Witch World* fantasy series (launched in 1964), calculating women replaced brawny men as key protagonists, fragile interdimensional portals replaced heroic interstellar voyages as modes of transport, and phallic spaceships gave way to vaginal wormholes as the means by which humans traveled to alien worlds.

In her space novels, whether aimed at the adult pulp market or children's libraries, it was a given that mankind would go into space, and that they would meet other intelligent life and be offered the chance not to make all the same mistakes they had made when sailing ships encountered new terrestrial populations.

In books like *Star Born* (1957) and *Star Gate* (1958) the related

ideas of human mutation and human hybridization are tackled with a candor and calm acceptance America *still* struggles to apply to the relative commonplace of interracial marriage. Freed of the need to conform to her external reality, Norton writes about humans not being afraid to change and expand the very definition of “humanity.” Note the following excerpt from *Star Born*:

[P]erhaps the change in temperament and nature had occurred in the minds and bodies of that determined handful of refugees as they rested in the frozen cold sleep while their ship bore them through the wide uncharted reaches of deep space for centuries of Terran time. How long that sleep had lasted the survivors had never known. But those who awakened on Astra were different. And their sons and daughters, and the sons and daughters of two more generations, were warmed by a new sun, nourished by food grown in alien soil, taught the mind contact by the amphibian mermen with whom the space voyagers had made an early friendship—each succeeding child more attuned to the new home, less tied to the far off world he had never seen or would see. The colonists were not the same breed as their fathers, their grandfathers, or great-grandfathers. So, with other gifts, they had also a vast, time-consuming patience, which could be a weapon or a tool, as they pleased, not forgetting the instantaneous call to action which was their older heritage.

In *Star Gate*, published the following year, a mutated race of brown-skinned, golden-haired Terrans finally land on a habitable yet *already* inhabited planet, then find themselves struggling not to “play God” with rustic native humanoids. Although advanced technologically and nearly immortal, the Terrans find it difficult to reproduce themselves. Many begin to mate with the locals, which results in a small but significant number of half-breed children. Norton portrays these half-breeds as caught in a kind of social limbo much as the American mulatto once was, since they are made to suffer in the subsequent power play between two races. And yet it is Norton’s half-

breed hero who helps reconcile all three sides. All this action incidentally takes place against the mind-boggling solution of a form of “parallel world” time travel, which allows Norton’s protagonists to escape into innumerable alternate histories for the same planet.

The near-future dystopia of *The Stars Are Ours!* (1954) postulates such an alternative history for Earth during the Cold War. Scientists are demonized and enslaved in this world as being the untrustworthy tools for global domination. As Norton explains:

Scientific training became valued only for the aid it could render in helping to arm and fit a nation for war. For some time scientists and techneers [sic] of all classes here were kept in a form of peonage by “security” regulations. But a unification of scientists fostered in a secret underground movement resulted in the formation of “Free Scientist” teams, groups of experts and specialists who sold their services to both private industry and governments as research workers. Since they gave no attention to the racial, political or religious antecedents of their members, they became truly international and planet- instead of nation-minded, a situation both hated and feared by their employers.

As subversive projections go, the one above is particularly provocative, and Norton takes it even further by having a small coalition of nationalist mercenaries frame the nonsectarian Free Scientist network for an orbital weapons takeover that accidentally incinerates large portions of the industrialized world. In the subsequent panic and devastation, a Luddite leader comes to global power, who is then assassinated and usurped by a cabal of even more radical technophobes to form the worldwide dictatorship Pax:

Renzi’s assassination, an act committed by a man arbitrarily identified as an outlawed Free Scientist, touched off the terrible purge which lasted three days. At the end of which time the few scientists and techneers left alive had been driven into hiding. . . . With the stranglehold of Pax firmly

established on Terra, old prejudices against different racial and religious origins again developed.

In this scenario the only escape from endless cycles of human prejudice is intergalactic travel, which is where most of Norton's most profound meditations on interracial and interspecies cooperation take place. This is the same conclusion the black American SF author Octavia Butler would posit four decades later in her *Parable* series, written *after* desegregation, the fall of Apartheid, Nixon's trip to "open" China, and Russia abandoning communism. Like Butler, Norton also writes strong, interesting female characters. But because Butler has never blended magic and fantasy into her work the way Norton did, there is a cool, overtly seductive sensuality to Norton's female *and alien!* protagonists that is missing from Butler's. There is always more than a whiff of the Turkish seraglio in Norton's *Witch World* tales, and even the *Free Trader* quartet, beginning with *Moon of Three Rings* (1966), offers a female sorceress whose compassion, beauty, and passion are like something out of a Shakespearean fairy tale.

It is almost as if because she was ostensibly writing for children, she could restore a charm and an innocence to sex, and to the body itself, which becomes more difficult when dealing with the more jaded and rigidly conditioned adult mind. Women in some of her stories are allowed to be casually, unabashedly nude at the height of their power and self-realization. This happens to the black-skinned heroine Simsa when she discovers she is the last living heir of the immensely ancient and powerful *Forerunner* race. In *Toys of Tamisan*, the dreamweaver/courtesan Tamisan becomes nude not only to ensorcel her clients, but also as a kind of ritual celebration of her strength, talent, and beauty. Hosteen Storm strips down to his most minimal Indian desert wear when he channels the power of his ancestors. Body consciousness and its implied sexual boundaries are such a big part of racial politics that it would be odd if a writer as sophisticated as Norton didn't deal with them, so she does . . . in a typically oblique—yet thoroughly effective—way.

In *Moon of Three Rings*, two alien humanoids, one human, and

several animals fall into a situation that results in the "souls" or consciousness of these discrete entities having to spend time in bodies not their own. Norton deals brilliantly with the traumas and taboos that must accompany such a change, and makes readers think deeply about how much of their identities are invested in their flesh, and how pitiful, in the end, such a shallow identity must be. How many other children's books of that time simultaneously tried to convey what it might feel like to be a man in a woman's body, a human in the body of an animal deprived of speech, or a member of a despised underclass suddenly given the fleshy exterior of his planet's all-powerful elite? When one of these transmigrating souls ultimately finds out he can never return to his true body, it is an astonishing moment of shock and epiphany for the reader. I remember it allowed me as a child to recognize a place of great loss and great freedom that was always near me but that I otherwise would never have found. It is a place I still return to from time to time when I need solutions to trivial worldly problems that require a completely "out of the box" perspective. Andre Norton was one of the first writers to knock me completely out of the temporal world in which I could never be more than a second-class citizen, and let me know I never needed to live there again. We need science fiction to get out of this sort of world. Especially when we are children.