

Claiming a Place in the Universe: The Portrayal of Minorities in Seven Works by Andre Norton

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ANDRE NORTON, a prolific writer of more than sixty works of fantasy and science fiction for children and young people, is an author who has devoted energy and attention to the minority individual through her writing. Her stories portray realistic minority characters involved in unusual and out-of-the-ordinary circumstances, often striving for survival in semihostile or alien environments. From her repertory of science fiction works, seven representative stories have been selected for discussion: *Star Ka'at* (1976), *Star Ka'at World* (1979), *Star Ka'ats and the Plant People* (1980), *The Beast Master* (1959), *Lord of Thunder* (1962), *Star Man's Son: 2250 A.D.* (1952) and *Sea Siege* (1957). Within this group of works we see represented stories about blacks and whites in black/white relationships, North American Indians, individuals of mixed cultural heritage as well as individuals who are minorities belonging to no known, defined race.

In reality, the outer regions of space as well as the lands of the other worlds that dwell within it, are open, unclaimed territory. Constantly under exploration by several nations, the truth is that thus far, space has, to a great degree, actually eluded man's territorial urges. Minorities must continue to stake their claim to Earth rights, but in so doing must not forget about the possibilities of space, that vastly unexplored region bounded only by the limits of man's imagination. The thought does indeed contain possibilities.

Norton has emphasized two major themes in the seven works selected here. She explores the theme of individuals attempting to deal with their own sense of isolation and alienation, conditions which in reality are ever present, varying only in their degree of intensity. Norton also

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points out, in this regard, that minorities are often, by virtue of their numbers as well as any racially (or other) identifiable characteristics, people at risk; at risk that is, through the actions of the majority. Secondly, Norton establishes the idea of real and believable minority characters. These are people of various age groups who are shown experiencing actual emotions and conflicts. Norton attempts to avoid stereotypes. Admirable qualities do not insure fault-free characters. Rather, these stories show people in crisis and the attempts of these people to stabilize an uncertain and perilous existence.

The concept of isolation/alienation is one that is realistically experienced across age and experience levels. Elly Mae and Jim in the *Star-Ka'at* series are children without families, and are also, children at risk.¹ The children meet and subsequently begin their friendship in an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. In *Star-Ka'at*, we learn that Jim's parents have been killed in a tragic plane accident, while Elly Mae, who is black, is in the process of losing her only living relative, an elderly grandmother. Elly Mae is the child with the most precarious future. Jim has foster parents who are providing a home for him. But essentially, these are children without "kin" which makes them special candidates for adoption by the interplanetary space Ka'ats, distant relatives of Earth cats. In a very brief span of time, Norton conveys the notion that the degree of isolation/alienation may have a strong connection to the development of special senses. Elly Mae is able to communicate with her Ka'at, Mere, using the special process of "mind-send," much more easily than Jim can communicate with his Ka'at, Tiro. When Earth is left far behind, it is Jim who has problems of adjusting. In *Star Ka'at World*, Jim's persistent need to be linked with a world of people leads both himself as well as Elly Mae into danger. In this story both children become minorities in the world of the Star-Ka'ats, and must deal psychologically with that fact. They do not like being treated like pets by the Ka'ats. Through this literary allusion, Norton subtly leads the audience to appreciate the plight of Earth pets.

By the third book *Star Ka'ats and Plant People*, Elly Mae and Jim seem to have largely overcome their sense of isolation. Elly Mae continues to forge ahead with plans, though feeling some fear as she does so. Jim feels more comfortable in Ka'at surroundings, aided somewhat by the fact that he has mastered some of the machines of "The People," descendants of humans or human-like beings. Elly Mae, depicted as a child who has been deprived of consistent schooling, is shown (through the text as well as illustrations) to be an attractive youngster. She is capable of accomplishing many things that cannot be accomplished by Jim. Yet both Elly and Jim are unable to operate the food machine in *Star-Ka'at World*, which the author hints, is a subtle way of the Star-Ka'ats' attempt to exercise control over the children. Here again, we are reminded that real Earth cats who have been domesticated by people, are totally dependent upon their "owners" for food; an especially frightening thought when posited in reverse.

In all three stories, there is a great deal of trial and error experimentation conducted by the children as they seek to discover the mysteries of

their new environments. In so doing, they rely upon natural and normal methods for accomplishing tasks. Elly, for example, uses the connection with stoplights in our world to the concept of "stop and go," to help her discover how to run an alien machine. Basic knowledge is transferred to the unlocking of higher order problems. While we may question the possibilities of such practical applications accomplishing mighty tasks, we must also acknowledge the fact that the applications are indeed those that a child, who by virtue of age lacks advanced knowledge, might try given a tight situation.

The friendship between the two children is particularly appealing. Jim reaches out to Elly Mae from the start. In *Star Ka'ats*, Jim's offer to assist her in the hunting down of things to sell, illustrates a firm offer of friendship. But quite naturally, Elly, having been ill-treated by the world at large, is suspicious of the offer. She, in fact, must be wooed. Once the initial barriers are down, the two children become a team and work as such during the two subsequent books. They show concern for each other as human beings. This does not indicate a lack of realism in Norton's plot, but rather the opposite. Concepts of race are not inbred in the young, but like all concepts, must be formally taught or taught through experience. Elly has had an unusually difficult life. She approaches strangers with a certain wariness. But because she is young and her mind is still open to other ideas, she accepts Jim as a brother.

The Beast Master and *Lord of Thunder* are young adult works that have as the central figure of interest Hosteen Storm, a young man of Amerindian heritage who has been exiled from his home planet, Terra. He has escaped the destruction of his planet physically, but not mentally. In *The Beast Master*, Storm is an isolate, regarded suspiciously by those at the Separation Center. Those who are refugees from Terra have been known to exhibit unusual and dangerous behavior due to the shock of their traumatic situation. Storm also has the unusual distinction of being a Beast Master, having the special ability which allows him to communicate with animals. He has as his loyal friends and associates an eagle, a pair of meerkats and a great yellow creature distantly related to the cat family. These creatures help to counterbalance the feeling of isolation Storm experiences. When he reaches Arzor, his destination, he forms a close and confidential friend of no man. Storm is a man with a mission—and a secret. His ultimate goal is to kill the man he feels is responsible for his father's death. This is a goal thankfully not realized, especially since Storm discovers at the conclusion that he is in error.

The "Norbies" are minorities of a different kind. They are the nomadic inhabitants of Arzor, and are the closest parallel to the relationship between individuals of Amerindian heritage and white men. Norbies have the general physique and stature of men but are different in two major ways. They have horns and also cannot speak the human tongue. They communicate among themselves using a sound commonly described as "twittering"; a sound that we are told cannot be duplicated by humans. Norbies are intelligent beings and communicate with humans through the use of hand signs. While Storm accepts the reality of the Norbies, others on Arzor do not. Norbies are regarded as inferior

and are often referred to as "pet goats." Yet the settlers of Arzor cannot ignore these beings, for Norbies know the land and its dangers in great intimacy. Total rejection of Norbies will mean trouble for the settlers. They are in essence, the "cultural or racial other" referred to by Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay "American SF and the Other":

What about the cultural and the racial Other? . . . If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself—as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation—you may hate it, or deify it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality, and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. And thus you have fatally impoverished your own reality. You have, in fact, alienated yourself.²

Storm is successful as a hero in the two stories because he has recognized the humanity of the Norbies. He does not have a "power relationship" with the Norbie, Gorgol. There is a sense of brotherhood. While he himself is an alienated being and a very private person, he does not alienate himself from the Norbies.

Storm is a realistic character who is aided by his special capabilities as Beast Master. He is a Prime Mover, and finds it difficult to resist a challenge. Therefore, in *The Beast Master*, he cannot refuse the offer to act as scout in search of the Sealed Caves. In *Lord of Thunder*, Storm accepts the challenge of acting as guide into the forbidden Blue section of Arzor, though he is not terribly quick about accepting the job. This fact lends credibility to his establishment as hero. An individual too anxious to take on the heroic task is not believable. One must show some hesitation. Storm turns down the first offer of the Blue expedition, but accepts it on the second occasion. He also has weaknesses. He is often disturbed by the fact that were it not for the magnificent and skillful beasts with whom he travels, he would have faced death on several occasions. He senses his dependency upon his animals:

Surra was an important part of him; without her, the composite entity that was the team was crippled, helpless as a man shorn of some important sense organ.³

He can also experience fear and revulsion. Storm's heritage causes him to be mindful of the sanctity of the human body. In *Lord of Thunder*, Storm must battle with his emotions when he stumbles upon the defiled body of Widders, the rash individual who had initiated the expedition in the first place. Widders' body has been brutally savaged by some unnameable monster of the cavern. There are some sights which even the strong cannot withstand.

Fors, of the Puma Clan of the Plains, is the young hero of Norton's *Star Man's Son: 2250 A. D.* Fors is a mutant, born with white hair instead of the brown or black hair of his tribe. As such, he is much scorned and feared by his clan. He is part of a civilization that is living two centuries after atomic war. Terrible things have happened. Frightening mutants have ravaged sections of Earth. Primary among such mutants are the hated and terrifying Beast Things. Fors leaves his clan in a dejected and rejected state, and goes in search of one of the lost cities of the Old Ones.

He believes that his father was well on the way to discovering a lost city at the time of his death—death inflicted by the Beast Things. He meets a worthy traveling companion, a black man named Arskane. Together the two battle adversity.

The concept of isolation/alienation is illustrated in the clan rejection of Fors. He also has unusual night sight that sets him apart from others. Fors has the ability to communicate with the catlike Lura, his constant companion. Since the usual expectations of boys of his tribe may not be shared by him, Fors must enter upon a quest for identity.

Arskane's initial appearance in the story is reminiscent of that of the character Friday, in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Crusoe is physically alienated and must come to terms with his environment, and later with Friday. Fors does not find acceptance of Arskane difficult. In fact, after rescuing him from a Beast Thing trap, Fors nurses Arskane back to life. Later, a strong relationship develops as the two explore a lost city together. Fors' relationship with Arskane saves Fors as well as Arskane from total isolation. Later however, when Fors is given the opportunity of permanent acceptance into Arskane's tribe or possible reconciliation with his own Puma clan, Fors cannot resist the lure of his own tribe. Norton signals hope for humankind and a breaking down of the barriers of isolation through the relationship between the two men:

"Together," Fors breathed, "we would make such a nation as this land has not seen since the days of the Old Ones!"

But here, Arskane stops him, mindful of the lack of brotherhood in that society:

"No, not a nation such as the Old Ones knew." Arskane's answer was sharp. "They were not one body—for they knew war. And out of that warfare came what is today. If the body grows together again it must be because each part, knowing its own worth and taking pride in it, recognizes also the worth of the other two. And color of skin, or eyes, or the customs of a man's tribe must mean no more to strangers when meeting than the dust they wash from their hands before they take meat. We must come to one another free of such dust—or it will rise to blind our eyes and what the Old Ones started will continue to live for ever and ever and ever to poison the earth."

Though he is not the leader in this expedition, Arskane possesses spiritual strength. He is forward looking and a man of dignified character. Arskane is alienated from his tribe only physically, having become separated from them during a scouting expedition. Norton shows Arskane's tribe to be a far more warm and accepting (though not totally unsuspecting) group of people than that of Fors. We are given the distinct impression that Arskane would have been branded an enemy had he entered Fors' tribe. Arskane is at one with his tribe.

Fors fails the test of loyalty. At one point he is forced to make a terrible choice that will result in the betrayal of Arskane. But this is not held against him. Norton appears to be saying that even in the basest of circumstances, all things are possible. There is a bond of friendship between the two men and later the promise of unity between the tribes.

Norton's *Sea Siege*, takes place in the West Indies immediately before

and during an atomic war. The story tells of the efforts for survival after the war and of the island of San Isadore's particular fight against monstrous sea creatures. These are highly intelligent mutant creatures who have presumably been affected by constant testing, prior to the war, of atomic weapons. The major protagonist is Griffith, who is white. However, the individual who possesses the most knowledge of the island is Dobrey Le Marr, a man of mixed racial heritage. Norton presents him as a formidable character and in many respects, a man of mystery. Some of the outsiders on the island would like to forget all about him and declare his knowledge ridiculous. But he has proven to have been correct on too many occasions:

Dobrey Le Marr was no witch doctor of the jungle, but he claimed some of their ancient powers. His knowledge of herbs had confounded Dr. Gunston, and his psychological understanding of his fellows, shrewdly used, had made him the most powerful man on the island, though he made no open display of his power.⁶

Dobrey Le Marr is on the outskirts of the scientific society. There is no indication that he would prefer it otherwise. He is alienated from the white people who are visitors to the island. However, like Arskane in *Star Man's Son: 2250 A.D.* he is not alienated from his own people. In such situations, a link is needed. Dr. Gunston provides this link, respecting Le Marr for his knowledge. However, when Gunston is injured and is sent back to the states early on in the story (never to return), his son Griffith and later Commander Casey help provide the link.

Within Griffith is the capability of respecting Le Marr and indeed all of the islanders as people and individuals. Griffith undergoes real inner conflict when he believes that Lizzie's family (islanders) has perished in a violent and unnatural storm.

Le Marr is a man who seems to be able to span two cultures. He is described as being able to alternate between the dialect of San Isadore and the speech of an off islander. Norton makes the point that the scientists and later the navy men, regard their work as being of the utmost value. Yet it is precisely the work of such minds that destroys civilization.

The islanders are a peaceful group. They would have been content to remove themselves totally from the twentieth century and live out their existences in isolation. Yet the world will not allow them to do this. They have been invaded by the men and the trappings of twentieth-century society. The islanders are being scourged by monsters created by modern science; monsters that shake the imagination. The anger and fear sparked by the monsters causes the islanders to commit a single violent act, that of burning down Dr. Gunston's laboratory. In the end, ironically, it is through the islanders that civilization will be maintained. They are innovative and resourceful. Lizzie knows the formula for a mysterious fish repellent, which will help all on the island to survive.

Le Marr is a man of strong convictions. Norton makes it clear that Le Marr blames the modern powers for having initiated their own tragic drama. The political groups, so diverse in their desires and strivings have been finally united in only one single act, the destruction of the

world. We cannot argue his placement of blame. Le Marr also raises the question as to whether man should be seeking knowledge about the mysterious sea creatures or, for that matter, making intellectual inquiries of any kind. After all, it was knowledge that destroyed civilization. We must also remember that he has the gift of foresight as well as uncanny wisdom, so much so that Griffith is prompted to ask: "Le Marr—who are you?"⁷ But we as audience must consider the fact that perhaps Le Marr's philosophy of quiet isolation from the modern world is flawed. It is against the nature of man not to inquire into the unknown. It seems his destiny to do so. Should man be blamed for inquiring or rather for his uncontrollable urge to gain power through inquiry? It is this perhaps, with which contemporary society must grapple and come to terms. It is possible that Le Marr really knows this and that his verbal expressions are no more than a brave (and vain?) attempt to convince us, his audience, as well as himself. Regardless of his internal desires, Le Marr is destined, through his own statements to that effect, to become part of the process; a prime mover in both the fight against the sea monsters as well as in attempts to unite islanders with off islanders.

In the seven works discussed here, Norton has used her literary vision to explore the "fantastic" situations of minorities in both future and other worldly environments. Emerging from her creative energies are tales of not only the unrecognizable alien but also dreams of those who are recognizably alienated. Norton seeks to investigate the possibilities of human (and other) interactions with the unknown. She has chosen to link this inquiry to themes illustrating a concern for minority individuals, who by virtue of numbers and resources, are outside societal mainstreams. In so doing, she raises contemporary concerns for our intellectual consideration. Certainly, good stories are welcome anytime, but stories which have the capability of bringing to the fore contemporary issues so relevant to the interests of all societies, are indeed particularly welcome.

References and Notes

1. Andre Norton wrote the Star Ka'at series in collaboration with Dorothy Madlee.
2. Ursula K. Le Guin, "American SF and the Other," in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Ursula K. Le Guin, (New York: Putnam, 1979), p.99.
3. Andre Norton, *Lord of Thunder* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), p.167. (First published New York: Harcourt, 1962.)
4. Andre Norton, *Star Man's Son: 2250 A.D.* (New York: Harcourt, 1952), p.106.
5. *Ibid.*, p.106-7.
6. Andre Norton, *Sea Siege* (New York: Fawcett, 1980), p.30-31. (First published New York: Harcourt, 1957.)
7. *Ibid.*, p.158.

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