

THE FORMULAIC AND RITES OF TRANSFORMATION IN ANDRE NORTON'S MAGIC SERIES

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Like many popular children's and juveniles' books, Andre Norton's are formulaic. Recurrent patterns -- like those used in the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and Tom Swift series -- provide particular comfort to readers, one to which they return again and again. This phenomenon is not restricted to younger people. Comfort has vaulted the predictable puns of Piers Anthony's Xanth series onto the best-seller lists and rewarded Manly Wade Wellman's lock-step Silver John Chronicles with many readers. In fact, there is a strong case for fantasy literature and particularly its heroic form as formulaic prose: evil is abroad in the land, a hero and fellowship arise with the prerequisite wizard, a psychomachia occurs, and good is restored. So Andre Norton's high library circulation and sales, along with the translations of her works into numerous languages and numerous fans, indicate that her formidable, six-decade-long canon that began in 1934 with the boys' adventure *The Prince Commands* continues to draw an avid audience for its predictability as well as its craft. Further, as one of the pioneers of strong and credible female characters, her fiction has appeal to both genders (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxx; Yoke, "Slaying" passim).

Much of Norton's juvenile fiction and the Magic series in particular -- *Dragon Magic*, *Fur Magic*, *Lavender-Green Magic*, *Octagon Magic*, *Red Hart Magic*, and *Steel Magic* -- concentrate on the dynamics of coming-of-age, self-realization, and rites of transformation as her young people discover themselves and their strengths. The formula is 1) a child, teen-ager, or a fellowship of either is displaced into a new and alien environment in the ordinary world (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxx-xxxii; Yoke, *Roger* 13). 2) The protagonists are anxious, unhappy, and confused. They are troubled by awkward events and frequently perceive their displacements as abandonments (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxx-xxxii). 3) Through some set of events, a portal or means to a fantasy world is discovered. 4) The other world (usually one based on history or mythology) is entered and a task of heroic magnitude, a struggle against evil to which both worlds are liable, is presented; and 5) by meeting the challenges, the characters are transformed into better people than they were at the onset (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxvii; Yoke, *Roger* 13; Wendland 9). In this process, they are often aided by guides, learning, and art, and their triumphs are part of one of the oldest and most appealing of literary quests: "the success and elevation of the innocent" (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxviii).

Two factors are the primary causes of the standard openings: a) awkward and problematic separation from a warm home and b) troublesome parents or guardians and/or difficulties in the new environment. These combine to produce both alienation and loneliness among Norton's youngsters (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxx-xxxii; Yoke, *Roger* 13). Cory Adler, in *Fur Magic*, tries to avoid natural order by clinging to the mechanized jeep when he is daunted by the wilderness challenges of the West, his absent father, his new family, his xenophobia (13) and equinaphobia, and his

own feelings of inadequacy and cowardice (36). Holly, of *Lavender-Green Magic*, is distrustful of the rustic, homespun world compared to her city home, and Crock (her brother) is sure that the other children look down on them because their grandparents live and successfully scavenge in a junkyard for special treasures that people have ignorantly and insensitively discarded. *Red Hart Magic*'s Chris Fitton and Nan Mallory both feel abandoned by their respective families and initially are at odds with each other (36). Both children's parents have remarried, and here -- as with the children's fathers in *Fur Magic* and *Lavender-Green Magic* who are, respectively, stationed and missing-in-action in Vietnam -- Norton provides real-world problems for her characters and readers. Also separated from her family, *Octagon Magic*'s Lorrie Mallard has even had her own sense of history taken from her; she discovers that, in Canada, ". . . she had learned the wrong kind . . ." In America, it's "Social Studies" (14). Thus, Lorrie, like many other Norton characters, must cross "... from a rejected past -- an empathically dead past -- to an undefined but developing future" (Wendland 11).

In addition to this, Lorrie now must live with her Aunt Margaret who is slow to recognize her need for solitude and creativity (37). The insensitive guardian who does not have true parental empathy is a common theme in Norton and is one of the links between the normal discomfort of the characters' simply moving to new environments and the unusual unpleasantness of living in new places. Another major occurrence of this is Aunt Elizabeth, in *Red Hart Magic*, who asks questions but never waits for answers (10-11, 25). Thus, Norton uses the familiar to lead her readers to the unfamiliar.

This alienation from the adult nurturer is compounded by the behavior of the children's peers, depriving the protagonists of any support (other than the occasional sibling who is still initially contentious). In *Octagon Magic*, Lorrie is taunted by "mean, hateful boys" (who later become friends as her understanding grows) with a typical, childish doggerel: "Canuck, Canuck, walks like a duck!" (13). Other illustrations from the Magic series of negative peer interaction are Nan's bouts with her peers' shoplifting and dares in *Red Hart Magic* (77, 81), the Afro-American children's excessive consciousness of their race and their imagined bigotry in *Lavender-Green Magic* (44-46) and *Dragon Magic* (10-11), and Kim's concern with his adopted status in *Dragon Magic* (25). These specific difficulties usually aren't very heroic, but Norton cleverly uses these normative concerns to foreshadow greater discomforts to come, for example, Holly's carsickness (*Lavender-Green Magic* 2). However, whether they are majestic or ordinary, the stresses always have great and quick impacts at intimate levels: Holly, for example, immediately feels that her world has gone to pieces and she is among strangers (2-3).

Amid their personal agonies, the characters are sustained and aided by, but never fully dependent upon (cf. Yoke, "Slaying" 7), wise and often supernaturally gifted guides. Here Norton displays the deep reverence for art, learning, and wisdom that is one of the trademarks of her entire canon. Miss Charlotta Ashemeade, the mentor of *Octagon Magic*, states this Norton edit: ". . . to forget or set aside any art is an unhappy thing" (55).

While there is certainly no explicit animosity toward formal schooling in Norton's canon, She generally favors the one-to-one sharing between mentor and acolyte. The mentors are encouraging, rigorous, and non-directive, encouraging the children's self-reliance and self-discovery, perhaps the only true form of learning since all that is acquired belongs to

the children and is not derived from external, dictatorial forces. In *Octagon Magic*, the child's guide is the long-lived Miss Ashemeade, whose life parallels the history of the octagon-shaped house and whose needlepoint, sewing, and golden needles have supernatural qualities (57). The children of *Steel Magic* are initially greeted and instructed in the ways of Avalon by Huon of the Horn and later are supported by Merlin. Cory shares shape and knowledge with the far more survival-wise beaver, Yellow Shell, whose body he shares in *Fur Magic*. His return to the ancient time of American Indian mythology and encounters with the Nez Percé's Changer and other animal shamans (i.e., the Thunderbird) provide him with profound insights into the nature of reality and the benefits of trying. So too, the children of *Lavender-Green Magic* learn from the folk art and crafts of their grandparents and from the wicca of the good witch, Miss Tamar.

The only other mode of learning that receives special favor is independent study in libraries, which achieve almost the status of sacred places. Lorrie in *Octagon Magic* loves the library (31, 33), and characters in the other volumes of the Magic series find them to be both sanctuaries from unpleasant onslaughts and fonts of information. Here Norton-the-author's character is mirrored in her fiction. She too loves books and research with their gifts of information and insight about the past (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xvi-xxii). As she describes it in "On Writing Fantasy": "But the first requirement for writing heroic or sword and sorcery fantasy must be a deep interest in and a love for history itself. Not the history of dates, of sweeps and empires -- but the kind of history which deals with daily life, the beliefs, and the aspirations of people long since dust" (8).

Norton's faith in art, nature, and mentoring is in direct contrast to her disgust for technology (Schlobin, "Andre Norton: Humanity" passim). Toward the end of *Octagon Magic*, when it becomes apparent that Miss Ashemeade's house will be bulldozed to make way for a highway, a now-wiser Aunt Margaret makes this quite clear: ". . . in the name of progress more than one crime is committed nowadays. I wonder just who will rejoice when the last blade of grass is buried by concrete, when the last tree is brought down by a bulldozer, when the last wild thing is shot, or poisoned, or trapped" (106).

Were there any doubt of Norton's stance here, she makes it emphatically clear: "Yes, I am anti-machine. The more research I do, the more I am convinced that when western civilization turned to machines so heartily with the industrial revolution, they threw away some parts of life which are now missing and which lack of leads to much of our present frustration" (qtd. by Brooks 22 and Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxvi).

As mentioned and in contrast, wisdom is unequivocally linked to nature and natural processes. Turning away from nature and tradition and depending upon technology, as Cory does when he clings to the jeep in *Fur Magic*, is a crime against humanity's essential bonds to its past and its natural home, and no good comes of it. Miss Tamar, the benevolent witch of *Lavender-Green Magic*, shares the law of the necessary bonds and laws between humanity and nature: ""That thou lovest all things in nature. That thou shalt suffer no person to be harmed by thy hands or in thy mind. That thou walkest humbly in the ways of men and the ways of the gods. Contentment thou shalt at last learn through suffering, and from long patient years, and from nobility of mind and service. For the wise never grow old"" (70).

Thus, the combination of knowledge, experience, and understanding of the past and nature yields wisdom and harmony. And, of course, wisdom and harmony (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxxii) are the ends of Norton's children's quests for truth and why her fiction has verisimilitude. What is most important to understand here is that the mentors' non-directive approaches mandate that the children learn for themselves through their adventures. Frequently, the children's malleability and willingness to learn make them far better students than their elders, and sometimes, as with Chris and Nan in *Red Hart Magic* and the four boys in *Dragon Magic*, they prosper with little or no adult intervention and are successful when and where adults cannot be (as in a number of popular, contemporary films like *War Games*, *Home Again*, and *Young Sherlock Holmes*).

Either before reaching a mentor or with the help of one, Norton's female (Yoke, "Slaying" 5) and male children always use sentient portals to gain access to the challenges of the fantasy realm. These gates open when the proper people arrive in the proper states (usually disrupted ones) at the proper times to confront conflicts of universal significance. To add further magnitude to these conflicts, Norton frequently provides settings of epic proportions. One of the best of these occurs at the beginning of *Merlin's Mirror*: "Time had been swallowed, was gone, and still the beacon kept to its task, while outside the [Merlin's] cave nations had risen and decayed, men themselves had changed and changed again. Everything the makers of the beacon had known was erased during those years, destroyed by the very action of nature. Seas swept in upon the land, then retired, the force of their waves taking whole cities and countries. Mountains reared up, so that the shattered remains of once-proud ports were lifted into the thin air of great heights. Deserts crept in over green fields. A moon fell from the sky and another took its place" (5).

Norton's use of these gates into magical places to mark the beginnings of the rites of transformation is yet another common characteristic of her canon (cf. *Witch World* and Schlobin "Andre Norton: Humanity" 29-30) and is an example of a frequently used technique in fantasy literature, "rationalized fantasy" (Schlobin, *The Literature* xxvii-xxx). The gates help readers suspend disbelief, as they too journey with the characters into fantasy realms, and also provide credibility and stature for the young characters, who are the only ones special enough to be accepted by the gates. Also, on a simpler level, the gateways to and the lure of the secret and unknown world have long had special appeal to both young and old, as with C. S. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles' wardrobe.

However, before giving the characters' imaginations and courage too much credit, it should be noted that the gates sometimes give the children no choice about entering. The magical puzzles in *Dragon Magic* are compulsive in their lure (31), and *Fur Magic's* Cory must enter the Changer's past to remedy his own ignorant tampering with a medicine bag (30-31, 43-44; also cf. Yoke, "Slaying" 6).

In *Octagon Magic*, Magic portals figure prominently as both the microcosmic doll house and the macrocosmic octagon house that surrounds it open special ways for Lorrie to follow (61). The large house only opens certain rooms for Lorrie and, as she follows Sabrina, the black cat she rescued from the abusive and rambunctious boys, she is guided to the small doll house. Its magic, doll-filled drawers and openings selectively lead her to

adventures in the past. Moreover, the experiences the doll house creates are more real, more alive, than the actual one (62). Much the same occurs in *Red Hart Magic*: Chris Fitton and Nan Mallory discover that an old and intricate peep show -- modeled on an Elizabethan, British inn -- and a dream pillow (32) lead them to shared dreams (51 ff.) of the past that are far more meaningful and yield more insight than their waking lives. *Lavender-Green Magic's* gate is a maze (57, 118-9); prophetic dreams guide its protagonists through its dark and bright sides to its corresponding witches, Tamar and Hagar, and Colonial America. *Steel Magic's* four gates open to the Arthurian realm (38-39), and *Dragon Magic's* four, interrelated tales use the compulsion of a four-part dragon puzzle to draw each boy back into his ancestral past: Sig Dortmund to Scandinavia, Artie Jones to Arthurian Britain, George "Ras" Brown to Africa, and the adopted Kim Stevens to China. In all cases, the gates either force or foster the drives toward transformation and growth is common among Norton's characters (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxxi).

The worlds beyond these gates are linked to normal existence despite their superficial incongruities. They are without confusion and have and revere clear lines of good and evil, right and wrong. These values are obvious to the clear-eyed and are truer than those of the normal world, which is typical of fantasy literature's more rigorous ethic systems. These realms provide the characters with far more freedom than they might have and/or with releases from too much control. As Chris observes in *Red Hart Magic*, "Kids were like animals at the old zoo. They were all in cages. Maybe you couldn't see the cages really, but they were there" (29). Thus, the other worlds provide far more autonomy and responsibility. Often, The characters have to discover and adjust to these new challenges themselves. *Fur Magic's* Cory, for example, has difficulty learning to accept the animals' world and truths (61-124), which, while they are alien to him, actually are intuitive wisdom once he learns to overcome his inhibitions and phobias.

As mentioned earlier, the normal worlds' prosperity is tied to the fantasy realms'. Thus, in *Steel Magic*, Avalon is the bulwark against the "dark" (44), and the wars and pestilence of Earth are the results of Avalon's weakening. Throughout the Magic series, these double burdens are mighty challenges, and the young characters are assailed in mind and body by both external threats and their own self-doubts and weaknesses (Yoke, "Slaying" 13). Predictably, in *Fur Magic*, it is the evil of the Changer versus Cory's and the animals' desire to postpone the Changer's creation of humanity (158) because, with its becoming, it will dominant the animals and destroy their sentience. In *Red Hart Magic*, the children are central in saving both people and property amid the persecution of the Papists in England. The three children of *Steel Magic* must use the magically transformed steel utensils in their picnic basket to recover the three treasures of Britain -- Merlin's ring, Arthur's Excalibur, and Huon's horn -- and to save, not only Arthur's Avalon, but their own as well. *Lavender-Green Magic's* characters' adventures in time lift the Dimsdale family curse in Sussex, Massachusetts (12).

The rewards for Norton's characters are invaluable and stress the didactic nature of productive change (cf. *Octagon Magic* 176). *Red Hart Magic's* children discover friendship in their common dreams (71) and later this transfers to their real world (179). Chris first discovers courage and Nan independence in their dreams, and the two children bring these virtues to fruition and effectiveness later in their mundane lives. Chris is falsely accused first in his dream, and the same situation occurs later at school; the first

experience prepares him to deal successfully with the second (166-72). And the necessity of the return from the fantasy world is always stressed, for to do otherwise would be "running away" (*Red Hart Magic* 175).

The essential quality of Norton's characters' successes is change (*Octagon Magic* 176) and self-actualization. These occur through the instructive values of experience, learning, wisdom, and open-mindedness. These trans-realm successes and epiphanies are of both cosmic and personal natures and occur through the children's creation of a bridge between worlds and each one's inhabitants. The sentient, tool-making animals of *Fur Magic* transform Cory's view of his own world (173-4), as do the encounters with the dragons for the boys' in *Dragon Magic* (183-192). Eric, Greg, and Sara in *Steel Magic* each overcome their personal weaknesses in Avalon (impatience, aquaphobia, and arachnophobia, respectively) and are much more functional when they return. So too *Fur Magic's* Cory loses his fear of horses when he is a beaver in the pre-human world of the sentient animals (173). Lorrie is cured of her prejudice about boys by becoming the dolls in the doll house's drawers and helps the other children overcome their own bigotry (108) by participating in the Civil War past the magic doll house recreates. She also learns how to interact with the other children in her real world. This process is outlined by Robert Scholes in *Structural Fabulation*; he observes that readers return changed by the fantasy experience (26); so too Lorrie and all the Magic series' characters return with different perspectives and attitudes after each of their travels.

Were this all the characters gained, Norton's fiction could be accused of being egotistic and self-serving, that her children operate only for themselves and their own gain despite whatever empathy and sympathy her readers feel. However, the revelations are not just subjective. Often, they are returns to or discoveries of the traditional values of family, self, and friends (without prejudice). Sometimes both immediate and/or extended families are found. Beyond this, Norton's characters return to their normal worlds as powerful forces (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxxi-xxxii) that create harmony among all who surround them. In fact, if there is a common theme throughout all of Norton's canon, it is harmony through arduous effort (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxxi-xxxii). This is not just the integration of people either. Her fiction's dynamic interactions among a myriad of conflicting forces -- natural law and technology, good and evil, pettiness and largess, selfishness and generosity, alienation and union, action and passivity, prejudice and tolerance (Schlobin, *Andre Norton: A Primary* xxviii-xxix; Yoke, *Roger* 21; Wendland 21-22), ignorance and wisdom -- set amid history and mythology reach from the past through the present to a generative, promising future that is a celebration for her readers and characters.

While all these dynamic interactions may justify the literary merit of Norton's formula, it still does not explain her ongoing popularity among the young and the old. That answer comes from her gifts to her characters and readers, and much of her appeal results from the identification of reader with character, a point well made by Albert Wendland (2, 23). Primary among these is empowerment. Clearly, the fictive escape from the negatives of alienation and estrangement that many feel is a characteristic that has ennobled much fiction in general. Add to this the message that the young, the "odd-ones-out," also are offered special tasks that are theirs and theirs alone, and Norton offers a positive alternative to the powerlessness that young people feel in the face of the authority figure, who they are sure does not understand them. Wendland articulates this desirous state

well: "It's ... when a reader, awash with longings and expectations, might want to trade in the past, to break from the confinement of childhood and parental authority to move out of the prison of the defined past and the defined self (defined by parents and environment) to enter a larger world of freedom and adventure, to test and thus to find a self through the exploration of a new landscape beyond the old confines." Further, the "longing of adolescence ... is not so much a desire to know what's out there but more the desire not to know, to maintain the sense of wonder and yet to find oneself capable of encountering it" (8-9).

This freedom is enhanced by the insistent message that, regardless of what the adult and peer others might say or believe, Norton's characters have special powers and prerogatives that take them beyond their critics and detractors, that they can operate with both understanding and confidence (Bettelheim 47-48, 61). However, this is not an elitist stance. Rather, it becomes one of the primary impetuses for the theme of harmony as her protagonists return to their detractors to make friends and create positive situations, relationships, and "new homes" (Wendland 10, 12). Thus, the characters' transformations, achieved through personal traits and arduous trials, become a boon to all and emphasize the ancient truths of wisdom, art, and learning.

However, beneath all this highmindedness (didactic messages, which certainly appeal to parents selecting books for their children) is an even simpler appeal. Through their hard work, efforts, and transformations, Norton's characters gain (and share with her readers) popularity with their peers and with adults. So, the rewards are two-fold: yes, there are adventures and transformations but there are also acceptances and recognitions, perhaps the best of all adolescent worlds.

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