

Introduction

by Andre Norton

There are those among us who are compulsive readers—who will even settle a wandering eye on a scrap of newspaper on the bus floor if nothing better offers. Books flow in and out of our lives in an unending stream. Some we remember briefly, others bring us sitting upright, tense with suspense, our attention enthralled until the last word on the last page is digested. Then we step regretfully from the world that author has created, and we know that volume will be chosen to stand on already too tightly packed shelves to be read again and again. In addition one is going to call other readers, wave this trophy bannerwise in the air—see what *I* have found!—proud to be the first among friends to have the great excitement of discovery.

This excitement does not come too often in a reader's lifetime of turning hundreds of pages. I have felt it perhaps only a dozen times in more than forty years of extensive reading. For me it was sparked by such books as *The Lord of the Rings*, the work of David Mason, a couple of A. Merritt's titles (which opened at the time a whole new world of speculation), plus some other favorites which I continue to reread with as much pleasure the second, fifth, tenth time as I did the first.

But never since reading *The Lord of the Rings* have I been so caught up in any tale as I have been in *Gate of Ivrel*. I do not know the author, but her talent is one I must envy. She has drawn an entirely believable hero on an alien and enchanting world, working in bits of customs, beliefs, and history so cleverly that it now certainly exists—somewhere. For

such a creation does not remain only in the mind, it begins to take on life and breath, depth, to stand complete forever.

The usual flaw in any fantasy novel is that the hero is the typical super strongman so it needs frantic action and constant movement to preserve the illusion of life. Ms. Cherryh's dour Vanye is already alive from the moment he steps onto the stage she has set for him. Certainly he is no matchless hero of the Conan type, but he possesses a strong code of honor which holds him to a course of action he inwardly loathes and fears. The reader can *believe* fully in each of his doubts, understanding his wavering, and his constant fight against what he considers his weaknesses. One cheers when he pulls some small triumph from the shadow of defeat, even when he breaks the honor which is his last pathetic possession, because he sees there is something here greater than all conventional oaths and codes.

In *Gate of Ivrel* there are indeed no supermen or superwomen—rather there are very human beings, torn by many doubts and fears, who are driven by a sense of duty to march ahead into a dark they are sure holds death. Ancient evils hang like noisome cobwebs, the stubbornness of unbelievers wrecks again and again their quest. Wounded, nearly at the edge of their strength, shamefully foresworn in the eyes of all they could once call kin, they continue to push on to the last test of all.

Few books have produced such characters as to draw a reader with them, completely out of this mundane world. Here the careful evocation of a highly complex alien civilization is so skillfully managed that one accepts it all without any longer remembering that this a creation of an imagination. It might be actual history—from another plane.

Reading *Gate of Ivrel* was an exciting experience for me, and I think I dare claim a wide background for knowing such books. My personal question rises:

“Why can't I write like this?”

I very much wish that I did.