

SPECIAL REVIEW

ANDRÉ NORTON *Plague Ship* Gollancz £1.20 192 pages. 8 x 5½.

Someone somewhere coined the phrase 'With-Harry-it-was-the-work-of-a-moment' to designate a certain kind of adventure story. The phrase is usually pejorative but I apply it to *Plague Ship* in admiration. The cliff-hanger, to give it a shorter name, depends on perfect timing. André Norton has always known when to suspend her characters in danger and when to move them to safety. *Plague Ship* is new to England but it was published in America as long ago as 1956. It makes a good case for a type of narrative not as popular nowadays as it has been, owning a long and respectable ancestry at least as far back as Defoe's 'real life' crime stories, and maybe further.

Dane Thorson played a leading part in *Sargasso of Space*, as the traditional innocent protected by fortune, and his role in the sequel is much the same. He is supported by the more experienced Rip Shannon, the brilliant Ali and an interestingly under-stated character, a Venusian colonist Jasper Weeks, who works in the engine-room. The way Weeks is brought forward gradually into the action is a lesson in narrative construction in itself. André Norton's object in the book is familiar enough. The mysterious 'plague' gradually removes the men of authority from the scene so that the young and inexperienced—salted by chance against the unidentified illness but not yet salted by life—are left to carry the *Solar Queen* through successive dangers from natural and human enemies.

This is emphatically not a plot to give away in advance. I can say that the story opens where the earlier book left off, with the Captain of the *Solar Queen* opening up trade negotiations on the planet Sargol with the concession they won as a prize for their success in defeating the pirates of Limbo. Diplomacy and luck win over the feline Salariki (one of André Norton's most skilfully invented races) but the traditional rivals of Free Traders, the powerful Inter-Solar company, put an abrupt ending to the ritual of trading of catnip for jewels. And so the adventure begins. An unknown disease, Terra after the Big Bang, the fight against wrongful accusation, kidnapping, the bold capture of hostile men and manned posts—we have had all this before. But not often with such fertile invention of details, such compulsive narration and such expert handling of character. Too much inward communing or minutiae of personality would soon check the pace of this kind of story and deflect its aim, which is to hold the reader in an Ancient Mariner grip. André Norton does not make this mistake but her people speak and act in character, and to a proper degree they *make* the action, with the hero, the fairy tale younger son, always in the forefront.

On the last page of this spanking adventure Cargo-Master Van Rycke remarks ". . . there's practically no trouble we can get into on a safe and sane mail route." Dane Thorson's exploits up to the present encourage me to hope that his creator will one day involve him in unexpected complexities in the space-postal service.