

SCIENCE FICTION AUTHOR INTERVIEW

ANDRE NORTON is the pen-name of Alice Mary Norton, a prolific and popular author of more than sixty novels of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Among her most popular books are a series of Time Agent novels; the space adventure tales set against the archaeological background of the ancient alien Forerunner civilization and her WITCH WORLD stories which utilize magic and sorcery in a fantasy world.

Recently, Ms. Norton very kindly recorded her answers to a number of questions posed by BRIAN M. FRASER, professor of the Science Fiction in the Media seminar series at the Institute of Social Communications, Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada.

FRASER: What do you see as the basic differences between what some people call "juvenile" science fiction and an "adult" SF novel?

ANDRE NORTON: The difference between a juvenile and an adult science fiction novel, you will notice, is that in a juvenile science fiction you do not use questionable material which has explicit sex scenes or an unusual amount of violence.

FRASER: How do you go about developing a complex and complete SF background, such as Galactic Free Traders, the Patrol, Forerunner artifacts, etc. How do you keep these elements consistent within a story, and within a sustained series of books over many years?

NORTON: To get your science fiction background correct, you keep very careful notebooks. For example, with my WITCH WORLD stories, I had a complete notebook with all the characters, races and material about gods, customs and so forth which can be referred to

with each book. This is also true of any book that is connected with another.

FRASER: In devising alien mythologies, how do you utilize language to evoke credibility and interest on the part of the reader?

NORTON: The language used in alien mythologies is gathered by reading very carefully such material pertaining to our own mythologies. There is a certain rhythmic use for rituals which is available in our own mythologies. This is what I draw upon for my own background mythologies.

FRASER: What are the special requirements of science fiction for the younger reader with regard to vocabulary, plotting, characters & characterization, and the complexity of science?

NORTON: I make no differences in vocabulary, plotting, characters & characterization between an adult and a juvenile novel. You will find that most of your readers in juvenile science fiction are among the

best readers in the class. Never write down to them, you never simplify.

Since I do not use straight 'hard science' in my books, but rather depend upon relationships of people, I do not know anything about using the complexity of science in such books.

FRASER: You've used animals very effectively in many of your SF books, often as major characters. What are the challenges to the writer in trying to make these animals individuals in their own right?

NORTON: Regarding the animals as individuals, if anybody has pets, they will already know that animals are distinctly individual. There is no difficulty in presenting them so, if you like animals, since they differ as much between themselves as people do. The challenge in presenting them is to make them believable to the reader. And you will not find this difficult if you do not have them have thoughts or perform actions which are not in equation with their status.

FRASER: What limitations do animal characters pose in the development of human characters, restrictions on movement, getting the reader credibly into the minds of these creatures or at least to accept their viewpoint?

NORTON: I do not believe that animal characters have any connection with limitations on human characters.

The animal characters can be presented credibly in cooperation with the human. Except for my one book, BREED TO COME, I always present animals in cooperation with human beings. It is my hope that one day we will be able to break the communication barrier with the animals who have lived with us for so many years. We are beginning to know now that their brains are not simply inferior to ours, they simply work on a different pattern. If we can learn this, we will have made a great stride forward.

FRASER: Quite often, you've used a character who can communicate with an animal, either telepathically or through empathic vibrations. The animal has usually been a feline. Why? Why not a dog, for instance?

NORTON: My purpose in using a feline character, in the major part, is because I myself have lived with cats for a great many years. I think I understand them better than I would a dog. I have a distaste for dogs and I have never owned one. Whereas I have -- though I can't say I have 'owned' because you cannot 'own' a cat -- had cats.

They are highly individual. I have lived with cats for over thirty years and so enjoy them and know more about them. Although I never use any animal in my books that I have not done extensive research on. I have consulted with authorities that know these animals and have read as much as I can on the animal itself.

FRASER: In the last decade, you've shifted dramatically from

science fiction or space adventure yarns to fantasy, sword-and-sorcery or stories relying heavily on magic, spells and myth. Why did you make this transition in your writing? What do you find the differences between the two genres?

NORTON: The difference between Sword-and-Sorcery stories and straight science fiction is that your hero or heroine in the sword-and-sorcery partly achieve their purposes through the use of occult means, for they are opposed by occult forces. Whereas, in a straight science fiction story, the end of the story is developed from some scientific principle.

Of the two, I prefer the Sword-and-Sorcery since I have a liking for research in the occult and love to use legendary material. My own tastes in reading go along that particular road.

FRASER: You've indicated that you're opposed to the 'New Wave' of SF. Why?

NORTON: My opposition to the so-called 'New Wave' of fiction in the science fiction field rests on several different bases. I dislike extremely the use of four-letter words and obscenity. Second, I do not want to approach fiction in a pessimistic way. Third, I like a straightforward story.

My own opinion of fiction is that it is meant to amuse and entertain, to provide a doorway into relaxation for someone who has problems they may want to escape from for a short space of time.

A story that employs obscenities, has a pessimistic reaction to the world-at-large, and which has no true story end but wanders around with the consciousness of several characters, to me, is not a good story.

FRASER: How did you first get into writing? What was the genesis

of your first novel and its publication? How did you get interested in science fiction?

NORTON: I entered writing when I was in high school as a member of the staff of the high school newspaper. I was one of a group of would-be writers who met on their own time after school. We were inspired by a very fine sponsor who herself was interested in writing. Out of our group of twelve students, we developed five professional writers who are still working in their field -- which, I think, is something of a record.

My first novel, THE PRINCE OF COMMANDS, was written before I was twenty-one. In fact, it was started while I was still in high school. It was based on the Graustarkian novels of which I had quite a collection at the time and which impressed me very much.

I was always interested in science fiction. But, since I could only write or have only written book-length stories, I could not sell my fiction--I had written two and had tried very hard to sell them -- until 1951 when the taste changed and the field was open to book-length novels.

FRASER: Do you have a specific writing schedule -- daily or yearly?

NORTON: My writing schedule depends on the amount of pages done, not on the amount of time used for that. I like to write early in the morning, beginning at about half past seven and going through until 10:30. If I am not finished my daily number of pages by that time, I go back until I do.

Up until last year, I did a chapter a day. Unfortunately since then, my health has failed. Now, I am lucky if I can get half-a-chapter on paper. I always have orders ahead and I do not know in any one year how much I will be able to write. I have in the past done as many as four books in a year. I do not think that now, as my health is poor, I will be able to keep to that particular schedule.

FRASER: Could you tell us something about the book that you are writing now? (Title, general premise, difficulties in writing it)

NORTON: The book I am currently working on is based on the fantasy war-game DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS. This is an unusual project for me because, instead of doing the type of research I usually do -- which is strictly reading research in books (I have used anywhere from 25 to 117 books for background for one of my own), I have had to use a game.

I've been very lucky to get the originator of DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS into my home and to play a game through so that I could take notes. As I say, I have never tried anything of this sort before and, since I never count on the sale of any book until I receive a contract, I don't even know whether this current one will sell.

I have found it interesting. I have even purchased the small figures representing each of my characters. It is fascinating to me, but whether it will appeal to the editors or readers, I have no way of telling.

FRASER: I would appreciate any other comments which you'd like to make about science fiction in general, fantasy, other authors, or your own career or interests.

NORTON: I have a great deal of interest in science fiction and there are some authors that I buy entirely on their names because I know that I will always enjoy their books.

However, when I am working on a book of my own, I do not read science fiction. It is far too easy to pick up something from another writer's work without realizing that you're doing it. It is only between books that I read science fiction.

Regularly, I relax with a mystery story, an historical novel or non-fiction. I am very fond of books of letters, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies in this field.

There are some of the new writers who are outstanding. The work of C.J. Cherryh, for example, and the work of Tanith Lee who is unusual in the fact that none of her characters are appealing or likeable yet she writes in such a fantastic form that I cannot lay her books down. I like Poul Anderson. I am lucky enough to have almost a full set of Eric Frank Russell who, unfortunately, has stopped writing, and who is one of the very few science fiction writers other than L. Sprague de Camp who can write humorously. I particularly enjoy Robert Adams and the Forest Clan stories, as well as other outstanding Sword-and-Sorcery which I will buy the minute I see them on the

shelves.

My own collection of books is quite large. Unfortunately, I have to 'weed it' every once in awhile because, as faces all of us, of a lack of shelf space. I will read and re-read a book several times if I like it and I only keep pieces that I do this to. I sometimes read a book for a single scene which has impressed me as very well-handled.

No writer's work ever comes up to their own expectations. You are always discouraged when you finish a manuscript. It is never as good as in your mind, when you started out. Usually when I finish a book and revise it, I never want to see it again. On the other hand, you forget what you have written. I can pick up one of my very early books and start re-reading it and be simply astounded by things in it which I have completely forgotten.

The pay for writing is not entirely monetary. I think that my best pay is the letters that I get from readers. They have proved to me that people do enjoy to sit down and write a letter to the person who has written the book. I have had a great many very touching and very interesting letters. From these, I have developed correspondence all over the United States and abroad. And since I am very much of a house-bound person, this is my way of travelling and I enjoy it very much.