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An Interview With Andre Norton

Conducted by Paul Walker

Andre Norton: Yes, I will agree to the interview, but I must in all fairness warn you that I do not live a very exciting life. In fact, I live a rather dull one—so if you are expecting fireworks, you will be disappointed. Also, I am not of the 'new wave' writers, but rather a very staid teller of old fashioned stories with firm plots and morals. So be warned and consider . . .

"A very staid teller of old fashioned stories with firm plots and morals." Why do you prefer this kind of story? Is it the kind of story you prefer to read? And if so, who are your favorite writers?

Yes, I prefer reading the type of story I write—that is, a tightly plotted action story. The 'new wave' fiction, with sprawling action and the anti-hero, is certainly NOT to my taste. And I see no reason for piling in sex scenes—much more can be accomplished by putting the reader's imagination to work—under-stating rather than over-stating. That, to me, is the better course in writing.

In sf, my favorite writers are Poul Anderson, Eric Frank Russell, James Schmitz, Ursula Le Guin, and Hal Clement. Their books I re-read—along with H. Beam Piper, from whom, alas, we shall have no more good tales. To me these people, their stories, appeal—they absorb my imagination. I can identify with their main characters. In fantasy, my favorites are Tolkien, de Camp, David Mason, Fritz Leiber—again, master story tellers.

The primary concern of fiction is to tell an entertaining story; not to display the whining weaknesses of main characters, but to give a hero or a heroine who stands up to difficulties as best he or she can and does not 'cop out' when the going gets rough. But then I am of the generation trained in the Depression and this was hammered into us in that day and age.

"Of a generation trained in the Depression." Would you tell me something of your background?"

I am of pioneer American stock (including an Indian strain introduced in the late 1700s). My father's mother was an Abbey whose family established the town of Enfield, Connecticut; her ancestors there fought in King Philip's War in the late 1600s. Her branch of

that line is directly descended from a man and his wife who were witnesses at the Salem Witchcraft trials.

My mother's line were Scotch-Irish-English-Penn Dutch and part of the clan were established in Ohio on those land grants paid to Revolutionary War soldiers for arrears in army pay.

I was practically an only child as my sister was old enough to be my mother and married before I went to school. Since my mother was very fond of reading—she knew a great deal of poetry and could tell wonderful stories—I was reading aloud long before I went to school. The Oz books were my pride and joy, and for every report card which matched my mother's standard of approval, volumes were added to my collection.

In high school I worked on the school paper as literary editor and there joined a special class under an inspired teacher who was the advisor of the paper. We met on our own time writing anything we wished. At the end of the year we 'published' our own book, through the courtesy of the printing department.

Five of this class are now professional writers.

My major was English, my minor history. I won the English trophy and placed first in the History Department final exams. I then went to Western Reserve University, but the Depression snapped down and I quit school and went into the Cleveland Public Library. Even so, I took writing and journalism courses at night.

My first book, *The Prince Commands*, was published before I was twenty-one, but in high school I wrote one which I later revised, and it became my second published book: *Ralestone Luck*. These were mystery and adventure stories.

When the war broke out I worked for a year in Washington, D.C., for a government agency (now long gone) which rewrote material in basic English for immigrants. Then I worked in the Library of Congress. Actually, I had gone to Washington earlier to open a bookshop (Mystery House) which was sold when I went into the agency. My writing during this period was confined to spare time and done in snatches.

In the 1940s I did a book on the Dutch underground—this was after I'd returned to

Cleveland for family reasons—and the book was picked up by the Junior Literary Guild. Thereafter I brought out a book a year: historical or spy stories.

However, in the late 1940s, my health began to break down and I had to quit the library to which I had returned in '42. I was asked by World Publishing to edit some sf anthologies and so worked into the field. I had wanted to do this earlier but, since I found the writing of short stories almost impossible, I could not. There was very little market for books then.

After my retirement from the library my output slowly improved and I found new markets thus enabling me to make a living at what I seem able to do best.

"I found the writing of short stories almost impossible..." Why?

I don't know. I could not plot in the lesser (briefer, stricter?) style of short stories until just recently. This was a handicap in getting started, as I said, as the sf magazines were the field long before books became readily available.

Going back to your statement about firm plots, what is a 'firm plot' and how do you achieve it?

A firm plot is one in which the action flows steadily in a pattern and is not entangled in whirls which add nothing to the story line and leave the reader baffled. (There are a number of writers now in the field whom I frankly confess leave me feeling that I am faced with merely grandiose masses of unintelligible sentences.) I work a certain number of pages for each working day, about four days a week. I try to get to my desk by at least eight in the morning, and I work until eleven, knock off for lunch, then go back and work until I have my quota for the day. Sometimes, if the story is 'running' well, this may be by twelve-thirty or one; sometimes later, especially if I have had any interruptions. I live alone and manage a house and am managed by five cats, so there are always interruptions of one kind or another.

I revise twice—the first draft is quite rough—just to get the story on paper—then I revise once with a pen—and when I make the final copy I revise again, usually, by then, simply a matter of cutting. Of course, there are always questions raised by the copy editor, which sometimes leads to minor revisions, but it is never too much, only a sentence or two for greater clarity.

You've developed a few 'series' books. How do you go about conceiving a series? How much preparation goes into the background and characters?

Usually I do not intend to write series books at all—in fact, the only series which was actually planned to be one from the first was that dealing with the Solar Queen. The others developed from a first book because I got so many letters from readers asking for more about the same characters. The Witch World tales, for example, were only supposed to be the first book, but I found that setting so interesting, and had so many inquiries, I kept returning to it.

A great deal of reading goes into the background. I read extensively in archeology, anthropology, natural history, folklore, travel, and psycho-esper research. The Witch World books lean heavily on my research into Celtic and British mythology and three of them are retellings of very ancient themes. *Warlock of Witch World* is based on the early Anglo-Saxon Childe Roland; *Sorceress of Witch World* on Sleeping Beauty; and *Year of the Unicorn* on Beauty and the Beast.

In my sf, *Dread Companion* is based heavily, once again, on English folklore, and *Dark Piper* is a retelling of the Pied Piper. *Ice Crown*, on the other hand, was an experiment to see if the old time mythical kingdom romance could be successfully combined with sf.

The characters grow with the book. I do have an idea as to my main characters in type and background, but once the story begins, the characters take over; and often times the ending of the book is far different from that which I had first blocked out. Luckily my publishers know this and make allowances for such changes from the outlines I submit before I begin work.

You, as well as your favorites, are regarded as 'hard-science fiction' writers yet you all

seem terribly fond of classical mythology and hard-fantasy. Why?

I think everyone realizes now days that 'mythology' does have a very ancient core of fact. More and more research has been instigated into this very subject. My own full interest has always been in ancient history and archeology—therefore 'mythology' is kindred to this.

I do not consider myself 'hard-science' at all—in fact, science has never attracted me. I am far more interested in why people do things and how they react or might react to circumstances than in any technology. I firmly believe that a too quick expansion of 'science' in the past century is at the root of many of our present ills.

What do you think are the special problems of the 'woman writer' in sf?

When I entered the field I was writing for boys, and since women were not welcomed, I chose a pen name which could be either masculine or feminine. This is not true today, of course. But I still find vestiges of disparagement—mainly, oddly enough, among other writers. Most of them, however, do accept one on an equal basis. I find more prejudice against me as the writer of 'young people's' stories now than against the fact that I am a woman.

I am very proud of the fact that I have been included in S.A.G.A. as the only woman writer, and consider this recognition as a real accolade delivered by writers whom I greatly admire.

"Prejudice against ... the writer of 'young people's' stories..." Would you elaborate on that?

In sf, for example, there is no recognition among other writers for the juvenile or young peoples' story. I have tried in vain for years to have a Nebula Award added to the SFWA ballot, but met with no interest whatsoever.

Why do you write juveniles?

Writing for young people came to me because I wanted to write adventure stories and was freest to develop the action story for young readers. I do not find the piling on of sex of any benefit and never did, and to my mind the straight action story does not need this. Thus—writing without this element when I began made it fall directly into the 'young people's' field. But, of course, this has also changed drastically in the past few years.

How has it changed drastically?

Many of the taboos of earlier days have disappeared. Also, the stories are growing grimmer and darker all the time. I agree with some of the removal of taboos, but I do not agree with fiction that is preoccupied with the seedier sides of life. One reads fiction for escape, not to be plunged into degrading and sordid scenes.

Of your books, my favorite is Starman's Son. I wonder if it reflected your own anxieties about the Bomb?

No, I was not thinking of the Bomb, except as a means of reaching the plot beginning. What had always fascinated me was trying to imagine my home city of Cleveland as it might be as a deserted ruin. Cleveland; then, was the city of that book—only distances in it have been telescoped.

Which of your books is your own favorite?

Among my non-sf titles, I am proudest of *Stand to Horse*. In sf, I think the Witch World books gave me the most pleasure when working on them, but I have no one book.

