

Interview with Andre Norton

by Susan Schwartz

Even in the rough and ready equality and sibling rivalry that mark fantasy and science fiction writers, some people are special. Probably the one writer whose attendance at a science fiction convention is likeliest to inspire dedicated readers to scour their bank accounts and make a special trip to see her, is Andre Norton. And that kind of devotion is not just limited to her readers. It affects the writers, too.

I first noticed this at World Fantasy Convention, which was held in 1987 in Nashville, Tennessee. It featured two superstars: Piers Anthony and Andre Norton. Because I had edited the 1985 anthology in honor of Andre Norton, *MOONSINGER'S FRIENDS*, I was asked to interview her. We were sitting in the Green Room waiting to go on when I noticed something new and different. The room was filled with writers, mostly women writers such as Jayge Carr, Nancy Springer, Judith Tarr, and a variety of others. These people are friends and colleagues: when they want to go up and talk to someone, they do.

Not this time, though. They knew I was there to interview her, that I had done *MOONSINGER'S FRIENDS* and that we were collaborating on *IMPERIAL LADY*. They wanted to be presented to her — *formally*, one by one. Only then would they

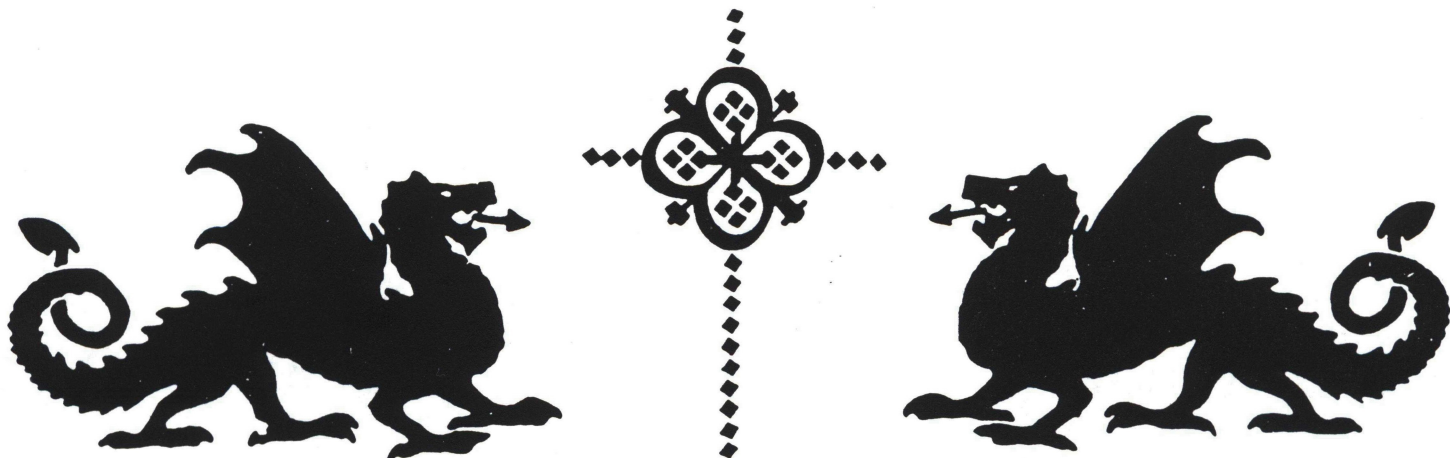
take their seats. Even then, they spoke only when they were spoken to.

Though Andre herself will deny it, she has earned special respect from women writers (though male colleagues remind us that they feel the same way). For many of us, she was not just the writer who introduced us to fantasy and science fiction, she was the role model who gave us the courage to try it. But then, her works have been the gateway for many readers who discover her and, under her careful sponsorship, are introduced to world after world of wonder.

Many of the people attending the 1989 World Science Fiction Convention, Noreascon 3, in Boston came to honor her and, probably, recapture a sense of themselves as kids, young readers for whom whole worlds were opening up.

Andre has spent her life creating worlds through her words. Andre redeems words and places. Take, for example, the word "lady". When I was in college, this was a word we were not supposed to use. It was elitist, snobbish, full of connotations of some frivolous, idle pet — as opposed to the strength and egalitarianism of the word "woman".

And yet I call Andre Norton a lady in the old and fine senses



of the word — gracious, refreshingly honest, eager to give of her best. In a time when many writers use their fiction as a platform to promote themselves or their theories, Andre is — another old-fashioned word — modest. She gives readers not herself-as-star, but her works, with no lectures or special pleading or fanfare. She does not seek to glorify herself and, though she holds strong opinions on subjects such as racial tolerance, the proper relationship of humanity and its machines, and kindness to animals, she does not preach. She is determinedly private — and readers create a very clear impression of her.

And the picture we get — of a lady who lives with her cats, who concerns herself with her work and her private charities, who is quiet, but stubborn in her ties to her family, her country, and her principles, who can flare with temper when her values are outraged, but laugh like a young girl — introduces us into yet another world. Though Andre herself lives in Florida now, her family settled generations ago in Ohio; when you meet her, you get the sense that you are meeting one of the leading citizens of one of Ray Bradbury's small towns.

It's a nice town, that village of the mind. No children run wild there or remain uncomforted; teenagers study and play and dream; and all the adults work hard. Cats sit on every porch — on good terms with the dogs who never bite. The streets are swept and well-lit, and you can go out at night and watch the wild creatures, who proceed on their own secret errands with no fear of humans and no need to fear them. Like Jorge Petronius, Andre Norton is a gatekeeper. Unlike him, though, she'll let you into her worlds and out again — taking with you the lessons you've learned from them. Like her own Miss Ruthvan, her craft opens people to wonders. Chief of those wonders may be the best that is in each of us.

She is a woman of few words, except in her writing. Recently, I was fortunate enough to catch some of those words and bring them to you. (A.C. Crispin has written two longer interviews with very strong bibliographic information, available in back issues of *Starlog*.)

Shwartz: How did you get started writing? Did you receive encouragement from parents, friends, coworkers, and editors early on? Do you think that it's harder, easier, or just different for a beginning writer now?

ANDRE NORTON: I received much encouragement from Mother and journalism teachers at school. I think it's harder for beginners now.

Shwartz: What are the values that you've drawn from your life and put into your fiction? (I'm thinking, of course, of your love of animals, your respect for cultural diversity, and your insistence on the importance of people over technology.)

ANDRE NORTON: I have never really tried to do more than tell a story, but *IRON CAGE* was the result of my rage over stories I heard of animal abuse.

Shwartz: You've written many different kinds of fiction. What caused you to make the transitions from the adventure fiction with which you began your career to science fiction, and from science fiction (such as the Solar Queen stories) to fantasy such as the Witch World stories?

ANDRE NORTON: For a long time, I wanted to write science fiction, but there was no market for book-length material, so I started with adventure. Fantasy appeals to me the most, personally.

Shwartz: If you had to pick one thing in your writing career that satisfied you the most, what would it be?

ANDRE NORTON: Probably my historical works, plus the Witch World material.

Shwartz: What books and writers have influenced you the most?

ANDRE NORTON: Talbot Mundy, A. Merritt, Rider Haggard, Dornford Yates, and B.M. Dix.

Shwartz: During a distinguished career as a solo novelist, you've also collaborated with many writers (myself included). Now, after the publication of *IMPERIAL LADY*, can you tell us something about collaborations in progress? (I'm thinking specifically of the ones with Ann Crispin, Robert Bloch, and Marion Zimmer Bradley and Julian May.) What do we have to look forward to? What do you find satisfying in collaborations?

ANDRE NORTON: I have recently collaborated with Robert Bloch on a Victorian murder mystery. I enjoy the Victorian period. I am also working with Marion Zimmer Bradley and Julian May on a long fantasy, *BLACK TRILLIUM*, with A.C. Crispin on another Witch World novel, and with Mercedes Lackey on a fantasy.

Shwartz: What prompted you to open the Witch World to other writers? In addition, what inspired you to open it to novel-length works by other writers?

ANDRE NORTON: So many people spoke to me of ideas which sounded fascinating, so I suggested they write them; also, I thought some of those ideas could be handled best in books.

Shwartz: Do you have additional plans for Witch World cooperations with other writers or additional products? (I mean Andre Norton Enterprises.)

ANDRE NORTON: There is one Witch World game out and a video game being worked on.

Shwartz: In the course of the past several years, you've been accorded two of the greatest honors that the science fiction community can bestow — you're the first woman named a SFWA Grand Master, and you were Guest of Honor at Noreascon 3. How did you feel about these things — and about your growing recognition both in and out of the field (i.e., the *Life Magazine* piece, *USA Today's* upcoming segment, etc.)

ANDRE NORTON: I still find it surprising and often wonder if it is really my work they are discussing.

Shwartz: You have frequently said that you're a storyteller. People speak of your ethical work and your feminist work. Does it surprise you to be regarded as a writer with a "message"?

ANDRE NORTON: Yes, though sometimes I hope something in my work will lead a reader to further research.

Shwartz: If you were a beginning writer right now, what would you do? Would you do anything different if you were starting to write now than you did when you began? What would you recommend that beginning writers do?

ANDRE NORTON: The market setup has changed so much I cannot honestly say what I would do if I were starting out.

Shwartz: What do you think of how science fiction and fantasy fiction are developing? Are you pleased with the writers who are coming along — with the growth of established writers?

ANDRE NORTON: I am very pleased to discover new writers, and there are certainly many more of them now.

Shwartz: Many critics have written of how your vision has "darkened" in recent years with books like *BREED TO COME* and *DARK PIPER*. Do you agree?

ANDRE NORTON: I think our whole world has grown darker, and one cannot help being influenced by that.

Shwartz: At World Fantasy Convention and at Noreascon 3, it was remarkable how the women writers seemed to feel an especial kinship with you, and how the men writers respected this. Can you speak briefly of the work you've done to advance the status of women in the field?

ANDRE NORTON: I cannot think of anything I have consciously done to advance the cause of women writers except the Gryphon Award.

Shwartz: If we were preparing a list of ten writers known for getting on political bandwagons, it's likely that your name would be absent. Yet, as we've seen before, you've done a great deal for women writers, and your books frequently deal with issues of equality for people (and beings) of all races, as well as animals. Do you find that you get your message across more effectively without preaching?

ANDRE NORTON: I think so — though I have taken a stand against certain types of writing.

Shwartz: What first made you aware of the concerns of oppressed groups, including various races, disabled people, displaced people, women, and the helpless, including animals?

ANDRE NORTON: Reading.

Shwartz: Do you think that major historical events that you've seen — such as the Depression or World War II — have contributed to your writing?

ANDRE NORTON: Yes, in that these influenced very much the generations involved.

Shwartz: What do you think of the experimental, and often deliberately controversial, fiction of the New Wave, Cyberpunks, etc.?

ANDRE NORTON: I do not care for it — but then I come of a different generation.

Shwartz: What do you think of your reviewers, whether in newspapers and magazines or the more recently emerging academic notice?

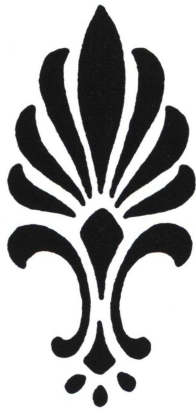
ANDRE NORTON: Most of them have been fair — one or two have made mistakes which showed that he or she had not read the whole book.

Shwartz: Do you feel a responsibility to your readers of all ages?

ANDRE NORTON: Certainly. They deserve the best work I am able to deliver.

Shwartz: Thank you, Andre Norton.

Editor's note: Since this interview was conducted, several of the collaborations mentioned here have been published. **THE JEKYL LEGACY**, written with Robert Bloch, is out, and **BLACK TRILLIUM**, by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Julian May, and Andre Norton is available in hardcover. The paperback edition has just been released. **THE ELVENBANE**, with Mercedes Lackey, is scheduled by Tor for October. **WITCH WORLD: THE TURNING: STORMS OF VICTORY**, a novel written in collaboration with P.M. Griffin, appeared in March as a Tor hardcover. Andre Norton outlined and edited the book, which was written by P.M. Griffin. **CatFANTASTIC II**, co-edited with Martin H. Greenberg, also appeared this spring as an original DAW paperback with a cover by Braldt Bralds, the artist who did the cover for **THE MISTS OF AVALON**.



The Gryphon Award

In 1989, Andre Norton created the Gryphon Award specifically to encourage women writers. If you are new to the field (with NOT MORE than two books published so far, and NOT MORE than a handful of short stories in professional magazines) this may be an opportunity for YOU!

Important Note: You may submit books for the Gryphon Award even if you have already offered them to publishers for reading.

The specifics:

Book-length manuscripts - 75,000 to 100,000 words

Cutoff date - July 31, 1991

Address - Gryphon Entries, 1600 Spruce Avenue, Winter Park, FL 32789

Prize - The beautiful Gryphon Award, plus \$500.00, plus possible book publication, plus presentation at the 1991 WorldCon in Chicago

So get those books in the mail today! As Marion says, "It doesn't have to be perfect...it just has to be done by Friday."