


NUTHOUSE

tricks, treats and other amusements
by and for delightfully diseased minds

Halloween Party 1998

Treatment 45  admission: one measly buck (\$1)

<http://members.aol.com/Nuthous499/index.html>

Boo! Welcome, boys and ghouls, to our merry institution's sixth annual Halloween bash. As administrator of this madhouse, I appreciate this festive occasion. Creaking floodboards, blood-stained utensils and cobweb-draped portals are transformed overnight from possible code violations into holiday decor. Unexplained screams in the night become ambience. Plus, I get to dress like Dr. Frank N. Furter without turning heads.

Our humor therapy for this session is a witches' brew of bone-jangling prose and shutter-banging poetry. It'll make you howl like a rib-tickled banshee. Sink your fangs into it, my pretties, and feast.

Dr. Ludwig "Needles" Von Quirk, Nuthouse Chief of Staff

The Magic of ANDRE NORTON

INTERVIEW BY DALE ANDREW WHITE

Only Rod Serling's brisk voice-over could have pulled that moment into melodramatic clarity.

Imagine: Andre Norton — an elderly spinster who has lived "so quietly ... for so many years" with her sorcerers, warlocks, cowboys and cats — engaged in her daily ritual of stuffing her mailbox with correspondence and manuscripts. Apart from her stern eyes, her chalky complexion, the purple tint added to her hair and her aversion to being photographed, she is like any author of dozens of genre novels who has legally changed her given name (Alice Mary) to the masculine one once chosen as a pseudonym.

An infernal contraption of 20th century mechanics stretches to a grumbling stop in her driveway. Norton, who has planned a genteel day of adding another magic-laden chapter to her next paperback novel, directs a perplexed stare straight at a stranger less than a third her age.

The invader, perhaps a well-meaning stranger from a backward gallatic empire, introduces himself as a freelance writer who requested an interview. He has come at the appointed time.

continued on page 9

The Magic of ANDRE NORTON

continued from page 1 ...Norton remembers – now. She ushers him into an ordinary central Florida home that has been seized by bric-a-brac, antiques and cat paraphernalia. Stroking a Siamese feline with sinister eyes, she agrees to discuss her Westerns, mysteries, science fiction and fantasies.

Critic Marcus Crouch insists Norton "gives a tangible quality to the most improbable invention by clothing it in vividly imagined detail, and her highly charged style – admittedly a little hard to digest in large quantities – evokes with equal success the terrors of darkness and the blinding glare of light."

Producing five or six novels each year calls for a formula. The Norton brew sets an uncertain protagonist, age 12 to 25, against an evil that can only be countered with mythic solutions that celebrate the Good. Behind the storyline rests what Norton calls "the kind of history which deals with daily life, the beliefs and the aspirations of people long since dust."

Equipped with this information, the interviewer employs his formula on Norton. He begins at the beginning.

Dale Andrew White: How did you sell your first book (*The Prince Commands*) before the age of 21?

Andre Norton: I had an alphabetical listing of publishers and the first one I sent it to, Appleton, accepted it. Actually, my second published novel (*Raelstone Luck*) was written first. I had to revise it before it could sell. Tor Books brought both out again. The first is straight adventure but the second is a murder mystery set in New Orleans in the days of segregation. It's still set in the same time period but I had to alter some of the black dialect that today would be considered racist.

W: Have you adhered to what you observed as a public librarian to be young readers' preferences in fiction – types of protagonists and storylines?

N: Yes, but they don't hold anymore. Those preferences aren't the same as when I started out... In the early days, I wrote for boys and they preferred to have protagonists who were from four to five years older than they, about 18 to 20 years old. Today, I write more for adults but I still have protagonists around that age.

W: As an editor at Gnome Press (1950-'58), what seemed to be the most prevalent problems with rejected manuscripts?

N: Actually, I was a reader. I checked manuscripts for content and style. Publishers still send me manuscripts to read and comment on. Lots of them are first books from those who must learn the trade better. There's been a big growth in the field of fantasy since Tolkien. I've found women to be very adept at fantasy. Women seem to write fantasy better than men. To me, it's

more acceptable. It's not the bloodthirsty type men seem to enjoy. They concern themselves with how people live when magic is an accepted thing.

W: When your characters are invariably confronted with evil, must that menace be unexpected and powerful enough to tackle mind and body?

N: Well, an insidious evil is worse than the other kind. The characters know they will encounter it. I don't write the Stephen King sort of thing. Good versus evil is a major conflict and an outspoken and visible conflict, especially in fantasy.

W: In an anthology you edited, *Small Shadows Creep*, you divided the collected ghost stories into three parts: ancient evils, vengeful spirits, quiet visitors. Are these your own distinctions?

N: Those were my distinctions. That was a difficult anthology to collect. All the authors were dead and all the stories were out of print.

W: Would you write about a protagonist you held negative values -- an anti-hero?

N: I dislike that idea extremely. It's a campaign for a distorted way of life as good.

W: In portions of the *Witch World* novels, I noticed certain characteristics in the peoples that I believe I've read or heard about regarding African or other tribes -- for instance, the not wanting anyone to know your given name due to the belief it will give that person a mystical power over you.

N: That's a basic thing of all witchcraft. That's why witches take different names when they enter a coven. Even the American Indians had names others didn't know.

W: Do you incorporate anthropological facts into fantasy novels to provide a people with a believable culture, an ethic, a religion?

N: You need a wide background to write fantasy fiction -- folklore, medieval history, anthropology, native religions...

W: In your fantasies, I noticed an Elizabethan quality -- suggested by phrases such as "blood debt" and "let their swords drink."

N: I read Elizabethan works, old ballads, sagas. The *Witch World* geography is based on England. I don't draw maps because I can see better in my mind. To see the real thing breaks the imaginative picture. That's why, in all the years I've been in Florida, I've never been to the space program (NASA).

W: With the computer craze steadily climbing, are you still "anti-machine"?

N: I'm not good with machines. I dislike them. The last thing I'll get is a word processor. They remind me of a short story I read in which robots write the novels.

The preceding article is an abridged version of a 1983 interview that originally appeared in Curriculum Innovations' Writing!