



MARK HUMPHREY / Associated Press

**Best-known for science fiction and fantasy works**, Andre Norton, 87, has written more than 130 books in a 60-year career. To make it easier for others to write about mythical worlds, she has started the High Hallack Genre Writer's Research and Reference Library in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

# PIONEER'S REPOSITORY OF FANTASY LORE

*Sci-fi writer opens genre library in Tennessee*

By Vicki Brown  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Murfreesboro, Tenn.**

**T**railblazing author Andre Norton imagined plots for stories about time travel and intergalactic traders who peddle their goods by rocketship while riding street-cars to and from her library job.

It was a welcome diversion from the Depression that gripped the country, but there seemed little chance her vivid imagination would lead to a full-time writing career. After all, women weren't supposed to write about such subjects.

The strong-willed Norton plowed ahead anyway.

"I always read adventure stories. That's what I wanted to write," she said.

mythical European kingdom, it tells the story of a young nobleman who returns from exile to help stop a Communist takeover of his homeland.

Norton wrote "Ordeal in Otherwhere," her first book with a strong female character. The character, a slave, escaped to a world ruled by women.

It was a bold move at the time.

"If you had a woman, the only thing she could do was stand in the back of a rocketship and wring her hands. Women were to be rescued," Norton said.

An editor prompted her to write her first science fiction novel, "Star Man's Son," in the 1950s because of the public's interest in space after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik.

"I don't like technology. I was always more interested in how people reacted to technology," Norton said.



made her legal name in 1934 — and began writing what she wanted.

“There were about five women writing fantasy, and all of them used male names,” Norton said. “We had no choice.”

Norton’s career has stretched nearly 60 years and has produced more than 130 books — spy novels, Gothics, adventure stories and the science fiction and fantasy for which she’s best known. She was the first woman to receive the Grand Master of Fantasy Award and the Nebula Grand Master Award.

Now, at age 87, Norton wants to make it easier for others to write about mythical worlds and fantasy kingdoms. Earlier this year, the woman who spent 22 years as a children’s librarian established the High Hallack Genre Writer’s Research and Reference Library on a quiet residential street in Murfreesboro, about 30 miles southeast of Nashville.

High Hallack is the name of a country in Norton’s mythical “Witch World.” Visitors can find it on two framed maps in the library, which Norton envisions as a retreat where authors can research ancient religions, weaponry, mythology or history that they need to bring their stories to life.

Like her own Witch World, which characters enter through hidden gateways to become entangled in the magical world that is the setting for 30 novels and short story collections, only a handful of travelers have found their way to the cozy library bedecked with gargoyle bookends and figurines of wizards Merlin and Gandalf.

Most of the response has been from members of the Science Fiction Writers of America, some of whom have donated books.

“I’ve been disappointed at the lack of interest,” acknowledged Norton, who remains committed to the project but has no specific plans for trying to attract more people.

Norton’s love of books and writing began with her mother, proofreader Bertha Stemm Norton, who started reading to her when she was 2 and made sure her children visited the local library weekly.

“We were just a bookish family,” said Norton, who was raised in Cleveland.

Norton began writing novels in high school and expanded her reading from classics to pulp fiction such as “Thrilling Wonder Stories” and “Astounding Stories.”

“This was in the days when one had to hide these types of magazines, because they were considered by some to be so trashy that a person would not want to be seen in public with them,” she said.

She took night classes at Cleveland College in every writing course she could find. And she wrote books.

Norton had no agent for the first 25 years of her career. She found her first publisher by making an alphabetical list, calling the first company on it and pitching a manuscript for “The Prince Commands.”

“They bought it,” she said.

It was 1933, when Norton was 20. “The Prince Commands” was published a year later. Set in a

see in 1996 because she wanted to start the library and didn’t like the population explosion in Florida. She found a farm in rural Monterey, about 85 miles east of Nashville.

But the hills of East Tennessee were too isolated for her and assistant Rose Wolf. A friend helped them find the house in Murfreesboro.

They converted and added on to a three-car garage to house more than 10,000 volumes. The books came from Norton’s own collection, a friend’s donation of Wiccan lore and the collection of military fiction writer Robert Adams.

It includes biographies, diaries, histories, science books — almost anything a writer might need to craft a realistic setting on any world in any time. The library opened last February.

Despite arthritis that forces her to use a walker — on which two of her 10 cats often ride — Norton shows no sign of slowing down.

She scoots around the library on a chair with wheels, pointing out 150-year-old brooms used in Wiccan ceremonies and prints by artist Frank Frazetta. She displays an almost encyclopedic knowledge of writers of every

genre — from the 100-year-old Gothic novels she inherited from her mother to early crime writers who chronicled such well-known cases as the trial of Lizzie Borden.

She detests sloppy history, recalling a book she read in which a character takes a train to Malta in 1808. There were no trains in 1808 and Malta is an island.

Norton said accuracy matters because she believes today’s education is so inadequate that many people must get their history from novels. If an author makes historical detail interesting, a reader might be inspired to research the subject more.

“It’s an opening to another kind of life,” she said.

Norton ended the popular Witch World series a few years ago with “The Warding of Witch World,” which tied together all the previous books and had the characters close the magical gates.

“It had just gotten beyond me. But then it was a terrible job ending it,” Norton said, noting she had to hire people to index the characters and books, some of which were collaborations and others that were anthologies.

Norton’s most recent effort was “The Scent of Magic” in 1998. She’s working on “The Year of the Rat,” which continues the adventures of a man who became emperor of a desert world in “The Mark of the Cat.”

Norton’s books have been translated into 18 languages, and she has signed a contract to have a number of her out-of-print early works published. She has no idea how many of her books have sold, although she says the 10 editions of the first Witch World book sold more than 1 million copies.

Norton remains modest about her accomplishments.

“I don’t expect to be remembered for anything. I don’t associate my writing with personality. It’s just a job,” she said.

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