

PUTTING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

INTERVIEW

With Andre Norton

by Brian M. Fraser



A SPECIAL ENCHANTMENT adds a mystical quality to the science fiction novels of Andre Norton, one of science fiction's most popular authors for decades, has been the intriguing pull of the past, the speculative possibilities of which fascinate her, she says.

"I've thought that the most exciting thing that could ever happen to anybody would be to land on another planet and find a ruined city," says the SF writer, "and then face the idea of what kind of people had lived there and what did they do."

Ms. Norton recalls reading Edwin Balmer's *WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE* and *AFTER WORLDS COLLIDE*, two books which were "very early but very well done," she says. "In *AFTER WORLDS COLLIDE*, when they move onto the new planet, they find the Domed City that is totally deserted. It gives you sort of a chill just to read about them exploring it."

A similar archaeological puzzle pervades many of Norton's own SF novels, a sub-plot featuring mysterious aliens which she calls the Forerunners. Their inexplicable artifacts, mysterious structures, and remnants of technology are uncovered on many planets through the Galaxy.

The incredible power and sophisticated technical advance of this unknown race are leavened with the enigma of why they disappeared, in books from as far back as Norton's 'Solar Queen' series, including *SARGASSO OF SPACE* (1955) and *PLAGUE SHIP* (1956), and in *THE ZERO STONE* (1968) and its sequel *UNCHARTED STARS* (1969), a secret which is still not solved in the more recent novel bearing the title of this alien archaeological search, *FORERUNNER FORAY* (1973).

"But there may be more than one civilization among the Forerunners, you see," the author explains. "Because we know now that our planet's system is relatively new, while the closer you are to the centre of the Galaxy, the older the planets are. So there could have been wave after wave of civilization—Rise-and-Fall—before we ever developed human life here."

"There's no reason why, if one could travel in space, they would not find remnants of civilization so old that there was nothing left, except perhaps Cyclopean ruins," she says, explaining the reasoning behind the Forerunner artifacts found in her fiction of Man's far future in space.

Analogies to our Past

"You can develop different portions of it and develop different civilizations," says Norton, "you don't have to define it as any one civilization—just like we have the Rise-and-Fall of Egypt, and of Babylonia and of Greece," she adds, making an analogy to Earth's history.

"They have all left remains but the civilizations themselves are gone. And some of them, like the Olmecs, we know nothing about. Why did they build those great big heads and leave them here and there? And heads that are plainly those of Negroes. Who were they? We know nothing about them."

"And we know nothing about those

recent discoveries in France, those drawings on the walls of caves which show people in very modern-looking clothing. They've found scraps of bone that are also computers. Now what kind of civilization was that?

"I really believe that we've had a series of High Civilizations which were wiped out by Great Catastrophes from time to time and that the Biblical Flood is the memory of one of those catastrophes," states SF author Andre Norton.

"But what I do think may have happened is that there were civilizations which rose to very high points technically. For example, there was a lump of quartz found in California, it was split open and there was a 'spark plug' inside," she says, amazed.

And, according to Norton, they have found electric batteries in Sumerian tombs.

Pyramid Power

"And who did the paintings on the walls of the Egyptian tombs," she asks, relating ancient mysteries to the current fascination and popularity of the exhibits of King Tut. "Way underground in the dark, there is no sign on the ceiling of any torch or lamp. Yet they must have had some light.

"Then what about the Great Pyramid of Egypt which has something queer about it. They've used radar on it trying to find out, but there's something in there that baffles any kind of investigation.

"It's very intriguing," says the animated author, "because there are so many things that are remnants, that were apparently highly-civilized and then just disappeared. And if these catastrophes occurred—and we know they did because we know the poles changed at one time—then all the people who would survive would be little remnants here or there of primitive people."

"Because the cities would be gone, they would be swept away and their technology would be lost."

A similar situation could even happen today, the SF writer speculates: "Because

if something happened here, for example, that wiped out all the electrical power, our factories could no longer run. We'd be reduced immediately to a bare sustenance and the only people who could survive would be the bare handful that could get a living from the ground. And they would revert to a Stone Age level."

Obviously, this possible future scenario has been played many times in the science fictions stories which predict or postulate a nuclear war and post-Holocaust or aftermath worlds.

In these worlds, there are inevitably massive concrete ruins of our city skyscrapers, freeways, and non-working pieces of technology. All this would be practically semi-mythical and inexplicable to most of the peoples still surviving several generations later, just as ancient cities now uncovered present paradoxes of the past in terms of the apparently sophisticated objects from supposedly primitive civilizations.

"This is the same kind of thing as the world of Meroe in ancient Egypt," says Andre Norton, "where there is physical evidence but nothing to support it."

"And of course, I collect books now on what I call 'speculative archaeology' where these things are brought out that archaeologists themselves can't explain. And they ask questions," she adds. "For instance, I've just got a new book on the ruins in the waters off Bimini. . . they found great walls and roads in the sea.

"Then there's things like the Plains in Chile where they've laid out those designs which can only be seen from the air. They couldn't even have laid out those designs unless someone directed them from above.

"Plus the fact that, in England, they've found that every one of the Great Cathedrals, the holy places in England, are based on the crossing of two magnetic lines. It's things of that sort which have been just recently discovered that are of great interest and give you the ideas," says the SF writer, who now lives in Winter Park, Florida.

"Now, *MERLIN'S MIRROR* is founded

on the background of this speculative archaeology," she says, mentioning her SF-fantasy novel based on Arthurian legend.

Archaeological Adaptation

Andre Norton makes use of her fascination with these archaeological dilemmas to write magnetic science fiction.

How? Well, she explains the origins and rationale for *THE WRAITHS OF TIME*, the novel which links a female archaeologist from the present, Tallahassee Mitford, with the mysterious power struggles within the civilization of Meroe in ancient Egypt. The result is compelling story material combining 'speculative archaeology' and some of the fantastic theories of science fiction.

"I've always been interested in Egyptian history and then I have several books from England on Meroe itself. It's fascinating because we know so little about it. They had a written language and they used Egyptian hieroglyphics for it. But nobody can translate it because it is not Egyptian; the hieroglyphics are there but they don't mean the same words as they would in Egypt.

"We know that at one time they were ruled by hereditary queens, and the Romans who fought them at one time called the Queen Candace. Well, we know now that wasn't her name," Ms. Norton explains, "it was her title—just like Pharaoh was—and that it was hereditary, probably descended by the maternal line.

"Egypt did this also. No Egyptian king could rule unless he married his sister—because she was the one who carried the power. That is true of a great many of the tribes in Africa to this day, that the inheritance goes, not through the King's sons, but to the eldest son of his sister."

Norton, who was a librarian for many years before ill-health forced her to retire and continue on a full-time basis her writing of science fiction, fantasy and other types of novels, does extensive research into ancient civilizations, their historical antecedents and customs.

Societal Roles

"I've found out some interesting things about African tribes," she states. "In several of them, there were three most important women who could overrule the King at times: the Queen Mother, who wasn't naturally the King's own mother but the oldest woman of the previous generation who had been the King's wife; his sister, that would bear the heir, and his wife.

"And, do you know that, among some of the tribes, they collected the taxes?" She goes on: "They had their own set of what you would call functionaries and they did the taxes and they had quite a bit of the rule."

This political power by women was not particularly restricted to just Meroe, Egypt or Africa either, according to Andre Norton.

"Just the same is true of some of the American Indian tribes," she reveals. "For instance, among the Iroquois, no man could be a Chief unless, they say, the women raised him up, proclaimed him Chief."

Norton's research explored these functions played by men and women in past societies. "Then I became very much interested in the difference. We think of African women as being very much oppressed; we think of them as slaves. Well, that wasn't always true. In the higher civilizations, and in the more civilized African states, it was just the opposite: they owned their own property and worked it themselves; anything they worked and sold from their own property, the money was theirs."

What If . . . ?

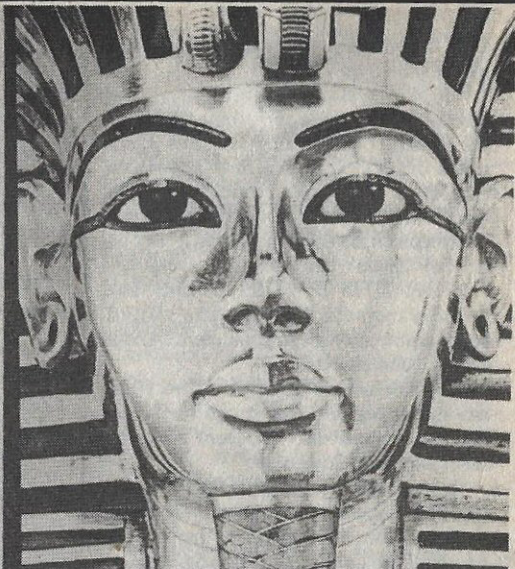
How does she integrate this underlying sociological background into a story of speculative fiction?

"I would get interested in Meroe, then I would get interested in this idea that I've always had of the 'If Worlds': If an event had gone the other way, what would have resulted from it? This is a regular historical theory and there have been several non-fiction books written on that subject," she

HURTLING THROUGH TIME
TO AN ANCIENT KINGDOM,
SHE BECAME
A WARRIOR GODDESS—
ENEMY OF EVIL

ANDRE
NORTON

WRAITHS
OF TIME



observes.

Norton contemplates a plot or storyline utilizing this combination.

"So I figured a world in which Islam had never risen. It was Islam which put an end to these early High-African civilizations; they just overran them and put everybody to the sword," she says, in an aside.

"So, if you figure that there was a civilization in Africa, which there was, around Meroe, and there was never any Mohammed, we would have had an entirely different history. Because, you see, there was one time in Mohammed's life when he was hiding out and if he had been found and killed during that time, there would never have been any wave of conquest down into Africa. She adds, "And it was the Arabs who started the slave trade in Africa, so if they had not risen to power, what would have happened?"

So, in *WRAITHS OF TIME* for instance, Norton the science fiction novelist sets up this other What If World, one which is an alternate to our world and history as we know it.

"Yes, an Alternate World," she says, "and they're tied together, because the

finding of the Object-of-Power in this world was tied to the Object-of-Power in the other and could draw through Time the person who was attuned to it.

"For another thing that I came across in my reading, which I used in the book, was that a building or an object which has been used for hundreds of years for a purpose of worship or ritual is supposed to develop a power of its own. That's why some of the Great Cathedrals of Europe have this effect on people who go in them.

"It's also true of objects that are supposed to perform miracles. They have really drawn power because they have been the centerpost of belief. Power is based on belief; if you don't believe, then there's no power; they're a focus of power because they're a focus of belief."

Wild Talents

This was where Andre Norton brought in yet another science fiction idea—which has proved fact—involving ESP, or 'wild talents' as she so often calls them in her books.

Her utilization of extrasensory perception is limited, however. She won't

write about any technique which she hasn't seen demonstrated.

"No, I'm pretty much a skeptic," she admits, "unless I see something myself or see evidence of it. I know that this (ESP) exists but it's something that cannot be controlled; you cannot produce it just like that. Either it comes at unexpected times and they can do something with it, but so far they haven't been able to control it."

In *WRAITHS OF TIME*, however, she employs an ESP technique called psychometry, which she has seen. "And it works," she asserts.

"Psychometry is holding an object and reading its history. And it can be done," Norton emphasizes. "It's very seriously used in archaeology now.

"Lethbridge, who was the first to use it, was able to locate quite a few sites by using the pendulum swinging from the hand. If anything which has been worked on or held by a human being is there, the pendulum will swing," she says, describing the methodology of psychometry.

Lethbridge, according to Norton, "was a British archaeologist who was one of the foremost authorities on the Pictish remains in England. And he used this to locate remains."

"Now, they're using it in this country. They just recently uncovered a digging site near Flagstaff, Arizona, that goes back 30,000 years."

In the novel, Tallahassee Mitford, her female protagonist or viewpoint character, comes into contact with two of these objects-of-power—an ank and a Rod of Office. She is drawn through Time into this Alternate World where she takes on the role of High Priestess at a crucial time in the civilization's history, during a confrontation which could lead to the world as we know it or along an entirely different track.

Definitions

Most of the action takes place in the past, but the book is not an historical novel, according to its author. "No, it's

science fiction because it depends on two things which we are not sure of: one is this theory of history, and the other is the control of objects-of-power.

"Science fiction is things that have not occurred yet," she defines the genre. "If it's a gadget story, it can be an invention which the people have that's possible, it has not yet been invented. Or it can be a mental awakening which we are not yet able to do.

"The difference between science fiction and fantasy is that fantasy depends on magic, which, in a way, is belief. It is a belief, it is not a concrete thing. Science fiction is more concrete: you have this invention or you have something that may in the future be possible."

But her book *WRAITHS OF TIME*, Norton points out, "isn't fantasy because there is no magic in it. From this point of view, it stands on two things: one, the theory of Parallel Worlds, which is a science fiction concept; and the other is a theory that objects gain power. "Now that," she admits, "verges on magic but not enough to make it a fantasy."

Ms. Norton, who has written more than 90 novels, is quite definite on the differentiation between SF and Fantasy, from the pure space opera of her earlier books, those that fit into the Sword-and-Sorcery category to her more fantasy-oriented stories.

Her popular *WITCH WORLD* series, for instance, are fantasy, she claims, "because they're based on the idea of inherited attributes to deal with powers. You see, there's a difference between sorcery and witchcraft," she explains. "Witchcraft is inherited and it deals with the natural forces; sorcery is learned and it sometimes deals with objects that are not natural forces.

"Sword-and-Sorcery developed from the old legends, it's an outgrowth of the fairy tale. In fact," she confides, "I use basic fairy tales often for sword-and-sorcery. I had Thompson's very good

book, *THE FOLK TALE*, which analyzes the basic elements of every single known fairy story and shows how they've changed from country to country.

"For example, *WARLOCK OF THE WITCH WORLD* is based on the old Anglo-Saxon story Childe Roland. And *YEAR OF THE UNICORN* is based on 'Beauty and the Beast'. By using these basic stories, you can just use that basic core and build up from there," says one very successful storyteller.

Writing Objectives

And author Andre Norton can compress the purposes of science fiction writing into one word.

"Escape," she says, "I think people read escape fiction. I think they need it badly. Oftentimes, I've had letters from people who have been in unfortunate situations and they tell me that my books have helped them because they were able to escape from thinking about what they've had happen.

"I had a very touching letter from a boy who was in an institution for drug addiction. He said that my story about the boy who had no face—he'd lost his face—that had helped him immensely, reading the book did.

"And if you can give anyone who is sick or is tired or has worries, if you can give him an hour's release and give him another, a different world, then you've done something," says the author, with obvious empathy to her readers.

She adds, "Also, I figure that if I write a novel which has something in it, like, for example, the Meroe story, then somebody will go to the library and ask for a book on Meroe and read more about it. Then I have accomplished something; I have opened a door for him."

In this way, she employs speculative archaeology and detailed historical research in conjunction with theories of alternate pasts and possible hidden mental talents—the fantastic starting-points of science fiction—to go beyond mere

writing for entertainment to development of the reader's curiosity for other areas.

"They become interested in something entirely different from what they have known and they pursue it. If you've done that, then you've accomplished a great deal," says Andre Norton, whose popularity with readers for 45 years is the practical measure of her great success in achieving this extra benefit, from science fiction, fantasy and other forms of literature. ●

BRIAN M. FRASER teaches a series of seminars on Science Fiction in the Media, given through the Institute of Social Communications, Saint Paul University/University of Ottawa in Ottawa, Canada. He has also written extensively on SF for many publications.

READERSCOPE

BOOK REVIEWS

by Tom Staicar

The Arbor House Treasury of Modern Science Fiction. Compiled by Robert Silverberg and Martin H. Greenberg. Arbor House. \$19.95 hardcover; \$8.95 paperback; also Book of the Month Club alternate and Quality Paperback Club selection. Talk about taking on a big job! The compilers of this fat volume attempted to select stories which would have the same impact today as two epoch-making books in 1946 called *Adventures in Time and Space* by Healy and McComas, and *The Best of Science Fiction* by Groff Conklin. Those anthologies, which incidentally were published the year I was born, are recalled nostalgically and fondly as the first books to comprehensively survey the field of science fiction. Del Rey still sells a trade paperback of *Adventures in Time and Space*, a book which is essential to even the most modest SF collection.

When I read the publisher's advance announcement of this book, I yawned