

To the Red Sands of Mars

by Andre Norton

Compulsive readers begin early but sometimes do not discover the most appetizing fare at the time and place fate sees fit to call them. You who can now go into any bookshop and see shelves thick-lined with science-fiction and fantasy novels—hardcovers or mass market—probably never realize the thrill the discovery of a single such book was, little more than fifty years ago.

There was Verne and there was Wells—and little else. I was just entering junior high school when a John Carter tale entered my life. The fact that a book such as *A Princess of Mars* could exist was a breath-taking revelation. Not only was this so, but it was one of a series! Unbelievable riches to come—quick additions to birthday and Christmas want lists.

Searches of the stacks in libraries could turn out single volumes such as *FB One Does Not Reply*—A “what if” action tale which preceded Lindbergh’s ocean flight by suggesting that such could be made only when one’s plane might land, refuel, and take off again from floating islands regularly spaced across the ocean. Then there were also the lost race novels of Haggard—really meaty reading.

British writers, probably because of the vast extent of the Empire, dealt expertly with such themes. They had not only Haggard, busily writing his way across Africa, also venturing into Mexico and South America, where his heroes faced Inca or Aztec enemies (in *Ancient Allan* he even gave us a look at the age of creeping glaciers), but a number of others.

Spending summer vacations in Canada gave me access to the work of followers of Haggard, volumes unknown on this side of the border. There was “Ganpat,” a British army officer in India using as pen name that of the Hindu god of writers, who had the power of evoking worlds in the shadow lands of the Himalayas and the Gobi desert. It was he who produced the adventure of *Harilek* and his comrades—such treasure hunts as in the *Mirror of Dreams*, which dealt with a preglacial civilization or remnants of such. There was also a Roy Norton, of whom I have never been able to discover more than his name, who, like Haggard, sought lost tribes in South America, and the Bruce who wrote *Mukara*, based on the vanished expedition of Colonel Fawcett seeking the remains of Mu.

Perhaps the books cited above could not be truly placed in a strict reckoning of science-fiction (though Ganpat introduced some suggestions of outré inventions) or fantasy—rather they were termed “adventure” stories, as were the blazing action novels which made up the total of Talbot Mundy’s incomparable books. However, they did more than skirt the edges of the field by introducing elements which were from worlds beyond reach.

Harold Lamb, before he became a noted historian, tried his hand also with such books as *Marching Sands*.

Fantasy had come through its own curling path, in and out of “respectable” fiction. There were the books of George



Photo by Christine Valada

MacDonald with their strong bent toward the moralistic necessary for acceptance during the Victorian period. Hodgson’s *The Night Land* (save for the over-sentimental prologue which has nothing to do with the real force of the story) is an exciting evocation of a dying world. He also ventured into horror with his *Carnacki the Ghost Finder*.

Just as John Carter took me to Mars so did two other unheralded finds set me searching even more widely. *The Girl in the Golden Atom* by Cummings was one such, but more impressive, and lasting, results came from Merritt’s *Face in the Abyss*. Here was color, weird beauty which I had not dreamed of. And it was to Merritt I looked when I thought of my own writing.

More old books had become almost impossible to find by the time I was in high school. So I turned to magazines. But Merritt’s *Moon Pool* could be read so in monthly installments. And there were others just as eye-binding to be found on such pages. These publications were considered by the world at large to be trash. Luckily my reading taste had never been in any way censored by my elders, as was the unfortunate case for many other possible readers. My father had a taste for such fiction at a much earlier period—recommending to my mother during their courtship the reading of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, which he read not for its socialist point of view but for the description of life in a future, much more technically advanced world.

My mother, an avid reader and an unsung storyteller herself, had known *Tarzan of the Apes* in its infancy and often spoke of the thrill she had had in reading as a magazine serial of the very early 1900s the novel *Darkness and Dawn*. She remembered the plot of this vividly, and years later was able to tell it to me before I was able to locate a reissued copy of the book.

So I became a regular purchaser of *Amazing Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder*, *Planet Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Weird Tales*, and the like—including all I could find on newsstands. Books, were far harder to gather but luckily some reprint companies took a chance on republishing serials which had been popular—such as the Burroughs books. I remember a long train trip when I was fourteen during which I had, joy of joys, *The Land That Time Forgot* as a companion.

I cannot claim that any refinement of taste was mine. Interest depended on the strength of the action, the rapid movement of the plot, the descriptions of strange and exciting backgrounds. I must firmly admit that my own desires turned me from the science-overloaded “gadget” story to the action one. I suffered impatiently through the science to get glimpses of new worlds or strange peoples.

The arrival on the scene of small publishing houses dedicated to the genre was a boon. Unfortunately most of the libraries (as there was a thing called the Depression then in progress, few of us were plump enough in the pocketbook to actually *buy* a new book) could see no good in the field nor would “waste” money acquiring fiction which (I never then met a supervisor who actually *read* the prejudged stories) was ranked impossible entirely by a glance or two at the cover of some pulp giving a slightly lurid and flashing presentation of a half-clothed female of our species being pursued by a monster. This was the standard cover of the period, just as a girl with flowing hair flying a night-embowered ancient mansion is the trademark of the modern gothic. I recall my impassioned plea, at one meeting for the buying for new titles, for the addition of Campbell’s *The Moon is Hell* which was firmly refused

because of the use of that *word* in the title.

Even bookshops did not know or care to learn what might be wanted. It was my opportunity of once in a lifetime to pick up, in mint condition, a copy of the Arkham House Lovecraft *The Outsider* for a dollar and a half on the discard table of the largest bookshop in Cleveland. Yes, we who wanted life beyond our own world were a very small minority and, save for a few places such as New York and some other centers, we were loners without any organizations. There were no conventions, we had few contacts who were interested in the same subjects as fascinated us.

The change which began gradually in the 1940s, and speeded up greatly in the 1950s, was first brought about by a number of small publishers existing only to publish in the field—such firms as Gnome Press, FPIC, Arkham House, and the like. An edition of one title consisted of around 1500 copies and there was little or no reprinting, no mass market editions at all. This limiting of editions leads now to the vast inflation of prices for the modern collector. However, most of what was published then now falls in the modern listing of “classics.”

I wrote my first two books in the genre in the late thirties, but they met with flat rejection from the publisher for whom I then had been writing adventure and mystery stories—Appleton Century, an old and conservative firm. As I found the writing of short stories difficult, the field I enjoyed the most seemed closed to me. Both these books, for which I had done an immense amount of research, dealing with the legends of Atlantis and Mu, were then merely scrap paper. Though, at a much later date, the first, rewritten, became *Operation Time Search* and did appear in print. But at the time I was thus firmly discouraged from trying again.

However, only a few years later, in the very early '50s, I was approached by World Publishing Company with a suggestion for me to put together a collection of short stories of my own selection—mainly as an experiment. I chose to gather those making up *Bullard of the Space Patrol*—seeking out the stories of that officer’s career through a number of magazines. The book was a success, winning the Boys’ Clubs of America gold medal. So stimulated, the publisher was induced to accept three more such works, subject anthologies—*Space Pioneers*, *Space Police*, and *Space Service*. I was aided in my quest by other eager readers, among them Harlan Ellison, then just beginning his distinguished career.

It was then suggested to me that I do a tale of my own. One of the ideas which had often intrigued me was a “what if” situation which would deal with my own hometown and state—Cleveland and Ohio. Out of this beginning I produced *Star Man’s Son*.

Ill health forced me out of the job I had held for twenty years in the library. I had more time, it was no longer necessary to write in small snatches, and certainly the will to plunge into the science-fiction field. For a while I served Gnome Press as a reader and that company produced my first series or rather the beginning of it—those adventures of the crew of the Free Trader *Stellar Queen* which appeared in *Sargasso of Space* and *Plague Ship*. Financial troubles ended this embarkation into the field. But now I was also writing for two separate publishers, alternating one book with another—Harcourt, Brace, and World Publishing.

Also I became a book reviewer of science fiction and fantasy—though at that time there was more of the former than the latter—for the *Cleveland Press*. This gave me speedy access to the work



of such leaders in the field as Heinlein and his now well known contemporaries.

The full power of fantasy was brought home to me by my reading of the first of the Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* volumes. I had reviewed *The Hobbit* and thus I was led to the actual spending of five dollars (in those days an almost unheard of sum for a work of fiction) for *The Fellowship of the Ring* at its first American appearance. Perhaps because of the price, the three volumes were brought out only one a year, which was an almost unbearable bit of cliff-hanging.

My own first excursion into straight fantasy occurred later. I had among my collection of unfinished scraps of ideas and scenes, which had never developed into complete narratives, two or three pages of what I had conceived of being a historical novel concerning Crusaders. This suddenly presented itself to me as an entirely different tale.

I wrote it in a rush of enthusiasm but there was no publisher eagerly waiting. All my work to this point was judged to be for the high school age reader. *Witch World* was definitely, as I saw it, adult.

Through an agent it was offered to a small, beginning house where the editor would only consider it if he was allowed a free hand to cut and edit. For the moment, uncertain as I was of its value, it having been an experiment on my part, I was led to agree.

But time passed and Don Wollheim at Ace showed an interest in the idea. Since the other editor had now had the ms. for over a year and apparently done nothing with it, it was shown to Mr. Wollheim, to be accepted without alteration. Though it was never meant to be the forerunner of a series, it had a sequel and simply went on from there.

I continued to write other books not laid in *Witch World*. My interests in history and archaeology suggested more and more themes and plots. Only one difficulty now arose: I felt that while I was writing some books of my own in the field it was better not to read for pleasure and relaxation the same type of work. Thus books upon books I wanted to read began to pile up. I must sadly confess that at the present time one room of my now very much extended library shelves *only* books I have *not* yet read but want and mean to. In a little more than fifty years I have gone from famine to feast.

Writers, however, seldom retire. Even if our hours before a typewriter (a relic still used, I assure all owners of word processors) must be curtailed because of aching backs. There is always a new idea, another story waiting in the back of one's mind. At present I am playing leap frog between three important projects, and am rather breathless because of it all.

But never have I forgotten the first thrill of travelling with John Carter across the red sea bottoms of dying Mars, standing to watch the weeping of golden tears by the Face in the Abyss, seeing the prehistoric wonders of *The Lost World*, listening to the mournful crying of the last dying Martian, left alone to perish, in *The War of the Worlds*, skulking undercover with Harilek and his comrades before the grim Gate of Death, treading the streets of Alexandria on the heels of Captain Tros. All this has been mine and surely shaped in one way or another what I have had to offer others. To seek with difficulty was to find, but even from the beginning riches beyond compare were there.