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Author Profile: Fantasy and Science Fiction

**ANDRE NORTON**

**THE AUTHOR BECOMES HER FICTION AND CREATES LIFE**

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by Roger C. Schlobin

2900 WORDS

Andre Norton is now celebrating her seventh decade of creative and fruitful literary activity. Since she wrote her first novel *Ralestone Luck* (1938) and published her first, the boys' adventure *The Prince Commands* (1934), the well over one-hundred volumes in her canon have entertained millions of readers in numerous countries. Of late, she complains of her inability to maintain a pace that, for example, produced six or seven volumes a year in the 1970's. However, as she seems to think her powers are waning, she, much like her characters, is a major power for productivity and nurturing. Beginning in the 1980's, she has become an important collaborator and a powerful editor on her own and in collaboration with Robert Adams, Martin H. Greenberg, and her friend Ingrid Zierhut. Extending her wisdom, craft, and professional connections to others, Norton has collaborated with Susan Shwartz (*Imperial Lady*), artist Karen Kuykendal (*Mark of the Cat*), Mercedes Lackey (*Elvenbane*), and A. C. Crispin (*Gryphon's Eyre*) as well as maintaining her long-term relationship with Phyllis Miller (the Star Ka'at series) and working with luminaries Marion Zimmer Bradley and Julian May (*Black Trillium*) and Robert Bloch (*Jekyll Legacy*). In addition to her enthusiasm for collaboration, her series' anthologies -- Magic in Ithkar, Tales of the Witch World, and Catfantastic -- have created opportunities for authors both established and new (including this author).

Further, she has firm plans to continue her support well into the future. Currently, she has further extended her precious Witch World creation beyond its anthologies to the novel, and Pauline Griffin, Pat Matthews, Sasha Miller, and Mary Schaub all plan to produce Witch World novels under Norton's auspices and direction. Were this not enough, she and Ingrid Zierhut progressing in turning Norton's Florida home (with its cat face facade) into the Norton Trust, a creative and scholarly sanctuary for visitors, which hopefully will see reality in her lifetime but seems to be assured of existence after that at very least.

Thus, in many ways, Norton is mirroring her characters and books as they have journeyed into future and fantasy realms as she affects nurturing and support. Norton's ability to craft fiction has become the power to create reality. Her experience among literature, libraries, and research has become her life and is her living legacy to the fields that have sustained her in all ways throughout her life. One need look no further, for example, to the wisdom and nurturing of *Octagon Magic's* (1967) Mrs. Ashemeade for the fiction that Norton makes reality. Just as Norton opens her canon to others, she sustains herself and affirms Miss Ashemeade's edit that ". . . to forget or set aside any art is an unhappy thing."

That Andre Norton would be so devoted to books and creativity was predetermined by her past. Born Mary Alice Norton in Cleveland, Ohio, on February 17th, 1912, her earliest memories were of her mother, Bertha Stemm Norton (the subject of the autobiographical *Bertie and May*), reading to her and reciting poetry as she went about the household chores. Later, when Andre began to write, her mother was her proofreader and critic-in-residence. A late child, her introspective interests turned to Howard Roger Garis' Uncle Wiggley books and Ruth Plumly Thompson's contributions to the Oz series. In addition, her rich family history fostered her interest in the past and its people. Her mother's family had been Bounty Land settlers in Ohio, and her great

grandfather had married a Wyandot Indian to secure a land claim. Thus, the seeds of such books as *The Sioux Spaceman* and *Fur Magic* were planted early. Her interest in books and learning continued during and were fostered by her unsatisfying tenures as a librarian in the Cleveland Public Library System (she was doomed by a lack of credentials) and as a bookstore owner. She soon turned to the more solitary crafts of writing and sharing living quarters with her beloved cats.

One confusion that has plagued scholarly apprehensions of her life has been why she changed her name to Andre (and lately André). First of all, it is not a pseudonym, but a legal name change that occurred when she signed her first book contract. Second of all, it was not in reaction to a male-dominated, sexist science-fiction market. Rather, it was in reaction to the male-dominated, sexist boys' adventure market, which was the focus of her first creative efforts (e.g., the *Sword* series).

This aside, it's clear that her career has been dominated by research. As Norton herself pointed out in her introduction to C. J. Cherryh's *Gate of Ivrel* (1976):

"There are those among us who are compulsive readers -- who will even settle a wandering eye on a scrap of newspaper on the bus floor if nothing better offers. Books flow in and out of our lives in an unending stream. Some we remember briefly, others bring us sitting upright, tense with suspense, our attention enthralled until the last word on the last page is digested. Then we step regretfully from the world that author has created, and we know that volume will be chosen to stand on already too tightly packed shelves to be read again and again."

Certainly, Norton's personal library would shame many scholars, and, within certain areas, rival libraries. Yet, the ones that have been the most telltale are those that have influenced her stylistic commitment to fast-moving plots. Here she mentions both the well and the little known. H. Beam Piper, William Hope Hodgson, and Dornford Yates are ones known to few; Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, and Talbot Mundy are known to many.

For her sources, she has pursued both literary ones and legitimate historical and pseudo-historical ones. Hodgson's *The Nightland* (which she was instrumental in having included in Lin Carter's Adult Fantasy Series), for example, is the direct inspiration for her *Night of Masks*. *Dark Piper* sprung from the Pied Piper of Hamelin folktale, and *Year of the Unicorn* is a variant of beauty and the beast. The Time Trader novels were inspired by Paul Herrmann's account of the Bronze Age Beaker Traders in his *Conquest by Man*. Joan Grant's *Winged Pharaoh*, *Eyes of Horus*, and *Lord of the Horizon* led directly to Norton's *Shadow Hawk*. She obtained Navajo phrase books and linguistic studies from the Government Printing Office to support *The Beast Master* and *Lord of Thunder*.

Lest this appear that Norton is just another historical novelist, she makes her distinctive sense of the past quite clear when she discusses epic fantasy:

"But the first requirement for writing heroic or sword and sorcery fantasy must be a deep interest in and a love for history itself. Not the history of dates, of sweeps and empires -- but the kind of history which deals with daily life, the beliefs, and the aspirations of people long since dust."

Thus, Norton treasures the past and human intuition and skills, and sees technology (despite her recent affection for computers and word processing) as a great,

dehumanizing danger. In *Octagon Magic*, Aunt Margaret might as well be speaking for Norton when she observes,

". . . in the name of progress more than one crime is committed nowadays. I wonder just who will rejoice when the last blade of grass is buried by concrete, when the last tree is brought down by a bulldozer, when the last wild thing is shot, or poisoned, or trapped."

Were there any doubt of Norton's stance here, she makes it emphatically clear:

"Yes, I am anti-machine. The more research I do, the more I am convinced that when western civilization turned to machines so heartily with the industrial revolution, they threw away some parts of life which are now missing and which lack of leads to much of our present frustration."

Indeed, one of the prime characteristics of her fiction is concentration on "life" as a showcase within which to revere the individual. In the first novel of Norton's acclaimed Witch World series, the witch Jaelithe brings the repugnance for science and the value of the individual together in one moment when she reacts to the perversions of the technological Kolder:

"A Man is three things .... He is a body to act, a mind to think, a spirit to feel." "Kill the body and you free the spirit; kill the mind and oftentimes the body lives on in sorry bondage for a space, which is a thing to arouse man's compassion. But to kill the spirit and allow the body and perhaps the mind to live ... that is a sin beyond all comprehension .... Only an unholy meddling with things utterly forbidden could produce such a death."

Norton highlights the individual quality and humanity of her characters by invariably making them exiles, outcasts, or misfits. In some way or another, they are always alienated and at odds with the existing social order (perhaps reflecting

Norton's own isolated childhood). Throughout her Magic Series, for example, youngster after youngster is broken from the world. Cory Adler, in *Fur Magic*, tries to avoid natural order by clinging to the mechanized jeep when he is daunted by the wilderness challenges of the West, his absent father, his new family, his phobias, and his feelings of inadequacy and cowardice. Holly, of *Lavender-Green Magic*, is distrustful of her new, rustic, homespun world compared to her city home, and Crock (her brother) is sure that the other children look down on them because their grandparents scavenge in a junkyard for treasures that people have ignorantly and insensitively discarded. *Red Hart Magic's* Chris Fitton and Nan Mallory both feel abandoned by their respective families and initially are at odds with each other. Both children's parents have remarried, and here -- as with the children's fathers in *Fur Magic* and *Lavender-Green Magic* who are, respectively, stationed and missing-in-action in Vietnam -- Norton provides real-world problems for her characters and readers. Also separated from her family, *Octagon Magic's* Lorrie Mallard has even had her own sense of history taken from her; she discovers that, in Canada, ". . . she had learned the wrong kind . . ." In America, it's "Social Studies." Thus, Lorrie, like many other Norton characters and as Albert Wendland pointed out at the Twelfth International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, must cross "... from a rejected past -- an empathically dead past -- to an undefined but developing future."

Moreover, her characters are often persecuted, hunted, or hounded as they strive to realize themselves and their special abilities or powers, affirm their values, and seek their own self-realizations. For example, Andas in *Android at Arms* defies an entire royal dynasty, and Fors flees his clan after being denied his heritage in *Star Man's Son 2250 A.D.* (Norton's first science-fiction novel). Simon Tregarth is a good illustration of all this. His escape from the predators of

the normative world via the Siege Perilous is the impetus for the entire Witch World series and takes him to an otherworldly realm in which his special magic can exist and where, yet again, he is hunted. Thus, the characters are ever on guard, ever wary. Ziantha, the female protagonist of *Forerunner Foray*, even has trouble dropping her defenses when confronted by one of her own psychic comrades:

"But this man [Lantee] with a talent akin to hers, equal, she believed. And she could not forget the actions on Terra's [Lantee's] time level that had just endangered them both, that they had shared as comrades, though he was now the enemy. He made her feel self-conscious, wary in a way she had not experienced before."

Primary among the unusual psychic characteristics Norton's characters possess is psychometry. Norton first discovered this mental power to read the history of objects by holding them in the works of T.C. Lethbridge, most significantly *E S P: Beyond Time and Distance*, *The Monkey's Tail: A Study in Evolution and Parapsychology*, *A Step in the Dark*, and *The Legend of the Sons of God: A Fantasy?* The estranged Merlin, the child of alien visitors in *Merlin's Mirror*, is an obvious derivation of Lethbridge's influence. Ziantha, in *Forerunner Foray*, provides one of Norton's best definitions of psychometry and how special powers make her characters different:

"For a long time it had been a proven fact that any object wrought by intelligence (or even a natural stone or similar object that had been used for a definite purpose by intelligence) could record. From the fumbling beginnings of untrained sensitives, who had largely developed their own powers, much had been learned. It had been 'magic' then; yet the talent was too 'wild,' because all men did not

share it, and because it could not be controlled or used at will but came and went for reasons unknown to the possessors."

Of course, Norton is cleverly using psychometry here to exploit not only to establish the nature of her characters, but also to introduce her love for and fascination with speculative history and archaeology and, in this case, a pseudo-science. However, for her, psychometry is not completely fiction. Norton was fascinated enough with it to conduct her own experiments and provide herself with doubting acceptance that she was dealing with a natural, mental force.

Her characterizations demonstrate Norton's obvious affection for her creations and also shows her generosity and lack of prejudice. Her virtuous characters come in all sizes and shapes, and she was one of the pioneers for women and other minorities (e.g., the female Black Tallahassee Mitford in *Wraiths of Time*) by not treating them as aliens in her works. Her open-mindedness extends to more than just humans. Her wonderful sentient cats -- like Fertig in *Breed to Come* -- and aliens -- like Cim the reptilian Vorken in *Star Gate*, the telepathic animals in *Beast Master* and *Star Gate*, the shapeshifters in *Year of the Unicorn*, and Eet in *The Zero Stone* -- are always treated with respect. This is made clear in *Star Guard* as humans are about to find a new and vital ally:

"Kana eyed the slit speculatively. It was too narrow for the length if it were fashioned to accommodate a humanoid. It suggested an extremely thin, sinuous creature. He did not feel any prick of man's age-old distaste for the reptilian -- any reminder of that barrier between warm-blooded and cold-blooded life which had once on his home world. Racial mixtures after planet wide wars, mutant births after the atomic conflicts, had broken down the old intolerance against the 'different.' And out in space thousands of intelligent life

forms, encased in almost as many shapes and bodies, had given 'shape prejudice' its final blow."

The major ways in which Norton shows respect for her characters and offers her didactic messages are through transformation and productive interaction. Without exception, her characters emerge from their trials and conflicts as better people (if sometimes still isolated ones). Their successes are based on change and self-actualization and occur through the pro-intellectual values of experience, learning, wisdom, and open-mindedness. Their trans-realm successes and epiphanies in both the real and fantasy worlds are of both cosmic and personal. For example, the sentient, tool-making animals of *Fur Magic* transform Cory's view of his own world, as do the encounters with the dragon puzzles for the multi-racial boys of *Dragon Magic* (183-192). Eric, Greg, and Sara in *Steel Magic* each overcome their personal weaknesses in Avalon and are much more functional when they return. This process is outlined by Robert Scholes in *Structural Fabulation*; he observes that readers return changed by the fantasy experience; thus, Lorrie of *Octagon Magic* and all the Magic series' characters return with different perspectives and attitudes after each of their travels. Were this not enough, the characters produce unity and harmony for others through their new-found powers and confidence. One of the penultimate illustrations of this occurs for Kaththea in *Sorceress of the Witch World*. Bereft of her family, her innocence crushed by adversity, she still finds one thin thread of trust and nurturing as she reaches for the common resurrection she and Hilarion, one of the most powerful of the Witch World's "Old Race," can achieve together:

"Thus I [Kaththea] was forced to open my eyes, not on the terrible blinding chaos I had thought, but to see who stood by me. And I knew that this was not one of Dinzil's breed, those who do not give, only take. Rather it was true that between *us* [Kaththea and

