

a Look at andre norton's work

by Lynne Holdom

(Note: I was expecting an article on Andre Norton from Greg Hills. However the Post Office was unkind enough to lose it between here and New Zealand. I wrote Greg about this but by the time my letter came to New Zealand, Greg had departed for Australia. I was hoping to hear from him by now but I haven't and I do think Neffers should get the publications every once in a while. However, since I do not have the time to do a massive rereading of Norton's works, I will be covering mainly two series of hers: the Time Trader series and the Crosstime Agent series as these were always favorites of mine.)

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I have always liked history. I originally trained to be a history teacher. I did not get this love of history from the school system. Far from it; history is probably the worst taught subject in public education today but from reading done on my own. And one of the authors, among many, who got me intrigued with the what-ifs of history was Andre Norton.

THE CROSSROADS OF TIME was not the first Andre Norton novel I read (that honor goes to DAYBREAK: 2250 AD) but it was one of the first. I was in 9th grade when I came across it. It gave me the idea of parallel universes and a Crosstime Patrol that figured in some of my own early attempts to write SF. (I was also intrigued by space travel and rockets but that's another matter.) It rather helped that the story is set in New York City -- not named but obvious from the evidence -- a city I was familiar with.

Briefly, one Blake Walker of uncertain origins, meets some Crosstime agents. Normally these agents erase the memories of those they encounter, but Blake Walker has a psychic shield that makes this impossible. So he must hide out with the agents and soon finds himself on a shuttle visiting various alternate universes until he is marooned in one. The plot doesn't matter all that much. It's predictable. What is intriguing is the many ideas that Andre Norton sets forth. There were those fascinating alternate worlds: the one in which the Mongols conquered all Europe; the one in which Hitler won the Battle of Britain (the one Blake Walker ended up in) and a really strange world that was never explained because the Crosstime agents had never run across it before. Here also I first learned of the Buffalo Soldiers -- Black cavalrymen who served in the West after the Civil War -- because one of the major characters was in one of their units. It was there that I first heard of the idea of non interference with developing cultures (STAR TREK was years in the future) that I also adopted in my early attempts at fiction writing.

I will here add briefly that the hags and hounds Blake Walker encountered in the unknown level are very reminiscent of the Hounds of Alizon in the Witch World novels.

The sequel QUEST CROSSTIME gives a glimpse of the Agents' home world -- one wracked by atomic wars where women are precious and protected and NEVER allowed to go into the alternate worlds. But a set of twins -- Marva and Marfy -- are allowed to work on an Earth where life never developed. (I must admit that I have a grotch here. It is usually accepted that the presence of life changed the atmosphere of early Earth -- ammonia, carbon dioxide, methane -- into the present one.) Then Marfy disappears, Blake Walker comes to take Marva home and their shuttle is wrecked in a world where sauroid seem to be the intelligent life. It seems there is a element that wants to end shuttle travel. One touch I liked was that Richard III survived Bosworth and became a good and fondly remembered king. But then I'm York since my family is from Yorkshire originally.

One problem with these novels for many people is the lack of aliens and alien life forms. There is some ESP but it's not developed as it is in the Witch World novels. Alternate history is not exotic enough to please many fans. Perhaps that is why there are only two books in this series.

The Time Traders series adds these missing elements. It also uses the Cold War as a background. The USSR has developed new weapons and these new weapons depend on a completely new technology. These seem to come from the past and a far past at that. Therefore the USA must train agents to go back into the past and recover some of that same technology. But is it likely that this exists in the past?

THE TIME TRADERS, the first book in the set, tells of Ross Murdock, a young juvenile delinquent, who is assigned to Operation Retrograde. A lot of the people on the project are misfits because the same qualities which make them misfits in our world, make them survivors in the past. But both sides have to be extremely careful not to change the past lest they change the present and wipe themselves out of existence. Ross first gets involved with a secret agent and later, on his first trip into the past, manages to find the source of the USSR's technology -- a spaceship that crashed eons ago and is now embedded in a glacier. Ross' actions make the aliens aware of the USSR's looting with disastrous consequences for both sides in the Cold War.

GALACTIC DERELICT: This is the second book of the series and introduces the second major character of the series, Travis Fox, an Apache Indian. (Andre Norton often used members of non WASP America long before other SF writers did.) Travis has been relieved of a university post because of a rising xenophobia in the USA. Alas, all too likely. Thus he is on the scene when Ashe and Murdock enter the Apache reservation to search for another crashed spaceship. They want to bring the spaceship into the present where its owners will not be a likely to come calling for it -- they hope. Unfortunately when they do this, they activate the main drive and the ship takes off for parts unknown with Travis Fox, Ross Murdock and Gordon Ashe aboard. Here the humans travel through space and learn that man is a relative newcomer to space -- another theme that runs through all the Norton novels where Elder Races, whether Old Ones or Forerunners, are common. Luckily they do not meet any other spacefarers on the planets they visit. They do manage to salvage a whole treasure of voyage tapes thus setting off the actions of book three.

THE DEFIANT AGENTS: This is book three in the set and the one I personally liked the best. Though voyage tapes have been shared equally between the USA and the USSR, a cache is stolen and the USSR now has an in on one of three planets. Therefore the USA chooses, against all agreement, to retrograde the Apache Indians destined for Topaz and send them there ahead of schedule without a briefing. This retrograding makes them live as their ancestors did in the past. But the ship crashes so that the Apaches are on their own. Travis Fox is there along with two animal companions -- coyotes. While out foraging he meets Kaydessa, a regressed Mongol living in the days of the Golden Horde. Unfortunately the Russians can control the Mongols using some sort of machine embedded in their spaceship. Because of this, the Apaches cannot really trust the Mongols despite the Mongols' desire to be free of the Russians.

KEY OUT OF TIME, the final book in the set, is parallel to THE DEFIANT AGENTS, since it deals with Ashe and Murdock on the water world Hawaiiki. Here too, is the man (in this case, woman) animal team, here involving dolphins. By the use of a window into the past, the agents learn that there was once more land area and a flourishing civilization on Hawaiiki. Then the Baldies came. One hundred years after that, Hawaiiki was devoid of intelligent life and the land masses were very different. Why. When Murdock and Ashe seek to find out, they are swept into the past into the period when the Baldies have just arrived. Since they never return to the present, we never learn just why the Baldies destroyed the life on Hawaiiki. There is a hint that Ashe and Murdock, by being in the past, will change the future (and the present) of Hawaiiki but... To my mind this was the least successful of the novels.

What is evident is a trend away from "hard" SF as the series progresses. There is a trend toward technology indistinguishable from magic. KEY OUT OF TIME reads much more like a fantasy novel than a SF novel. Hawaiiki, with its preindustrial civilization, is presented in glowing terms. Ashe and Murdock do not mind being marooned in such a civilization. It is preferable to the drab technology of the world they have left. The Apaches and the Mongols also find life more satisfying on Topaz than they ever could have on Earth. Though it's more understandable in their case as they were second-class citizens in their native lands. On Topaz, the technology left over from the Baldies also seems magical rather than simply advanced technology and the Mongol shaman is the one most responsive to it.

The Baldies' technology is also something to avoid since it is extremely powerful and evil. Thus the Baldie remains on Topaz have the same force as the Places of Power in the Witch World and inspire the

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is fed by hate and fear. I cannot but feel that any outsider who is unaware of the effects of the Troubles on the Irish people would be moved by this book.

Most of the mythological elements of the story will be familiar to readers of fantasy, but some mention should be made of the significance of the use of Bealtaine (Beltane, May 1) and Samhain (November 1). These are the two major feasts of the Celtic calendar, dividing winter and summer, and are the fore-runners of the more recent May Day and All Saints' Day. The use of Samhain is particularly appropriate, because during the time of this festival, the boundaries between dead and alive, natural and supernatural are removed and the natural order of the whole universe changes. (This was the origin of Halloween which was Samhain Eve in the Druidic world.) It is a fitting setting for the climax of a book that explores these boundaries, as well as those of the human spirit.

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same reaction -- there are some things man was not meant to know and will learn only to his own destruction. ESP and psi powers take the place of modern science. The only good thing gained from the Baldies is the voyage tapes. All these trends foreshadow the WITCH WORLD novels with which Andre Norton goes from SF to fantasy. These trends are even more noticeable when you compare the WITCH WORLD novels with DAYBREAK 2250 and THE STARS ARE OURS, both of which show a community of people trying to preserve as much knowledge as they can against the no-nothing culture of the masses.

One final point is that in these novels there are some peoples who are simply evil and that is that. The Baldies are one such group. True, they do try to control Ross Murdock but he was looting their ship -- as were the Russians -- and their anxiety to capture him and control him could simply be a matter of policy that advanced technology is not to be permitted the natives who might misuse it. Certainly the Baldies' Empire? Sphere of Influence? is shown as having many different peoples in it. We never hear what they did on Hawaiki or even where the destruction of life on that planet was due to the Baldies or to native Hawaikians who misused Baldie weapons, or indeed if this destruction might not have been due to a natural catastrophe. (There is a theory that the dinosaur became extinct due to the fall of an asteroid which landed on the mid Atlantic ridge sending up clouds of dust and debris which blocked the sun's rays thus killing off most plant life and animal life.) Something similar could have happened on Hawaiki -- we have no way of knowing. Those Others in THE STARS ARE OURS are also simply evil and to be avoided. Dard has read a couple of their books before he decides this, but since the reader is never given a hint of the content of these books, Dard's judgement seems a bit arbitrary. Also how do we know that Dard didn't pick up the alien equivalent of sado-machochistic porn? It's also true that Those Others once kept slaves, fought wars and left people alone to die. At their worst, they sound no worse, if even as bad, as the humans they were escaping. However, those to be avoided generally are those with high technology and an interest in knowledge no matter where the pursuit of that knowledge takes them. The people in THE STARS ARE OURS who are the villains, are Know-nothings who persecute scientists. (They are also about the only ones whose villainy and savagery are explained. They hated scientists because they had devised the weapons that laid waste their world) Since I have a problem accepting evil as a simple given: this man is evil; this alien race is evil; this constitutes the greatest weakness in Norton's work. Those Others and the Baldies may indeed have been evil but I wish Andre Norton had shown us this, not just told us.

But these minor weaknesses aside, read the books. They are thought-provoking, filled with a sense of wonder, and have genuine heroes and heroines. I grew up looking for each new Norton novel. I'm sure others did too. So read them and enjoy.

There are two new Witch World novels out. HORN CROWN which is the definitive WITCH WORLD novel and tells how humans came to the Witch World. GRYPHON IN GLORY which is a sequel to THE CRYSTAL GRYPHON and a prequel to THE YEAR OF THE UNICORN.