

THE PROMISE OF THE WITCH WORLD

by Kathleen Woodbury

I had several things I wanted to say about Andre Norton's WITCH WORLD books, but then I read C. J. Cherryh's introduction to the latest one, LORE OF THE WITCH WORLD. To my chagrin, she had said it all and more. So I will take a different approach. I will ask why this "place of dark shadows and alien powers and human beings touched with strangeness" is so appealing. Could it be because we all, in the corners of our own minds, live in such a place? Because we see our own world as "full of mysteries"?

It seems to me that Andre Norton's protagonists are extremely easy to identify with. They are people caught in a world not of their own making who strive to find their own place and in the process, "find extraordinary things within...themselves."

The beginning of the series deals with a man in our own world who doesn't quite fit. He receives the opportunity to find the world "in which his spirit, his mind -- his soul if you wish to call it that -- is at home. And he goes forth to seek his fortune there."

The first few books in the series are about this man, Simon Tregarth, and the members of his family on the Witch World. He finds love and fulfillment there and that love is very special. One of my favorite quotes on love comes from the second book, WEB OF THE WITCH WORLD: "He knew that she had those depths and silences to which she must withdraw upon occasion, that he meant none the less to her because of those withdrawals. They were a part of her and so to be accepted. No one could ever occupy all of another's thoughts and emotions. There were parts of him which would be closed to her also. But to take without question what she did have to give, and offer in return, freely and without jealousy, all he had -- that was what their union meant."

From the friends and family of Simon Tregarth, Andre Norton moved to others in the war-ravaged Witch World. The effects of the outer conflicts of war and the inner conflicts of aloneness and lack of self-understanding on the lives of the protagonists are explored time and time again. Her characters are looking for something and usually find part of it in themselves. We, as her readers are looking, too, and her stories have great appeal because of what they suggest might be there, inside ourselves.

As SF fans, we often find ourselves on the outside, not belonging, recipients of sideways looks and snide remarks. In SF, we find a place for the extraordinary imaginations and dreams we have and we find others with whom we can share them.

In all her stories, Andre Norton promises triumph; but in the Witch World stories with their Old Ones and Witch Women and Were-Riders, she promises even more. The world is dark, but we carry light within us. The enemy is strong, but our faith in ourselves can be stronger. Against all odds, we can reach out past our limits, we can try just a little harder and we can overcome. We may be afraid, we may not understand, but if we just hang on a little longer, the understanding will come, the fear will go away, the light will shine through the darkness. Just a little bit longer and we will win. Who can resist a promise like that? Not I, I dream too hard; and so, I think, does Andre Norton.

Witch World novels: Witch World; Web of the Witch World; Three Against the Witch World; Warlock of the Witch World Sorceress of the Witch World; Year of the Unicorn; The Jargoan Pard; The Crystal Gryphon, Zarsthor's Bane; Trey of Swords.

