

OBSTRUCTS, MIND-SEALS AND DISTORTS

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Forerunner Foray. By Andre Norton. Longman Young Books £1.60. 0 582 16258 0.

The Zero Stone. By Andre Norton. Gollancz. £1.60. 0 575 01615 9.

I am never quite sure why it is that Andre Norton, certainly one of the best science fiction writers in what must now be considered one of the traditional corners of the field, is taken to be a writer primarily for the young. I do not mean that that is the wrong audience for her — far from it — but it would make perfectly good sense to think of her as addressing an audience of all ages. She has one of those curious, intricate, passionately odd and persuasive imaginations that can create and sustain a fantasy universe, complete with geography, a subtle adumbration of future science (that is, it's cunningly suggested rather than predicted with technical exactness), an entire mythology and a vocabulary to match.

Her's is a universe in which the layers of human history (primitive, medieval, modern and so on) are reproduced in terms of planets, of space explored and laid under inter-

planetary law and also of its wild edges, where are to be found the equivalents of the monstrous figments of early terrestrial exploration—the two-headed, those with heads growing from their armpits. . . If she has a particular scientific vision to promote, it is of an extension of extra-sensory perception. So the heroes and heroines of her universe tend to be sensitives, able to explore not only living minds but dead ones, and to drive themselves, by the exercise of sheer mental force through space and time. This gives rise to a fascinating variety of terms: detects, mind-locks, obstructs, mind-seals, distorts (all being nouns).

Forerunner Foray is perhaps the more characteristic of these two stories. Zintha is a gifted sensitive in the service of the Thief's Guild. (I cannot give a confident account of the guild—it is a sort of spaceborne cartel of outlaws.) Used to track down a source of great energy on a dead planet, she is trapped in the past: and can escape only by descending into an even older trap of time.

In the course of this deeply Gothic adventure—in which most directly the terrors of one period become the terrors of another—she,

somehow, frees herself: somehow, we guess (the emotional reference is brilliantly ambiguous) falls in love. ("Companies" is the author's word for that—beings and worlds company one another.) The strange excitements come thick and fast.

The Zero Stone begins like a sort of science fiction *Treasure Island*: a father dead, a curious stone inherited, piracy and gem trading: and there we are, goodies and baddies hunting one another across a riotously vegetable outer planet, and in a form of space travel that is like some huge violent game of shuttlecock. How easy to be ridiculous, when the imagination has such scope! And how well that is avoided, by the discipline to which Andre Norton subjects herself: the discipline of that always consistent vocabulary, those cool references to the marvellous. ("Voyage-sleep and a sealed cabin was primitive travel indeed in those days.")

Under it all, there is a storyteller who can always invent a credible escape from a hopeless predicament—given, of course, that she has also the power to enlarge our credulity out of all recognition. Compared with the ordinary run of adventure stories for young readers, these are as steaks to sandwiches.