

# ANDRE NORTON: WHY HAS SHE BEEN NEGLECTED?

by Barry McGhan

Some time ago, an article about Andre Norton,<sup>1</sup> by Lin Carter, appeared as an introduction to the latest Ace reprint of her book, *Star Guard*. Carter begins by remarking, "Andre Norton is something of a phenomenon in science fiction today." He offers three reasons: her writing, purportedly for juveniles,<sup>2</sup> is read by adults; she is almost never published in magazines; she is ignored by the "serious" critics of science fiction. He goes on to say, "I mention these somewhat puzzling factors in her career without attempting to explain them." I believe that these "puzzling" factors are worth a closer look, not so much for what they reveal about Andre Norton, but for what they disclose about the field of science fiction and its critics.

Of the factors mentioned above, the central one is that she is ignored by those who write about science fiction. But before discussing it, I would like to deal with the others which, I feel, may contribute to it.

The first curious factor is that her writing, supposedly for youngsters, is read by adults. That many of Norton's stories are published first in hardcover, for the juvenile sections of bookstores and libraries, may prompt the critics to dismiss her as a writer of "kid stuff." But Norton's novels are invariably reprinted by Ace and so become part of the general s.f. market, where they receive the attention of young and old alike. Also, juveniles are discussed from time to time in the magazines, some of Robert Heinlein's juveniles having seen first publication there. (P. Schuyler Miller has remarked several times that Norton equals and has perhaps supplanted Heinlein as an author of juveniles.) In short, juvenile stories do receive general attention and are discussed by critics, so that the juvenile image should not account for lack of attention to Norton's writings.

The second curious factor, that until recently Norton's stories didn't appear often in magazines, also may account for the critical silence. Since her stories got no regular magazine distribution, her contact with the field of regular readers was reduced, thus providing additional justification to avoid criticising her work.

As noted above, the central factor is that Andre Norton is ignored by the critics, notable examples of omission being Sam Moskowitz's Seekers of Tomorrow and Damon Knight's In Search of Wonder.

Although ignored by the critics, Andre Norton is not ignored by the readers. In a period of more than fifteen years she has sold some thirty five novels, and is one of Ace's best-selling authors. Her novel Star Hunter received a Hugo nomination and her novelette Wizard's World was a contender for the 1967 award. She ranked eleventh out of a list of the seventeen most prominent writers in the November 1966 Analog reader poll. She has been likened to such writers as A. Merrit, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Cummings and Robert E. Howard.

This last comparison furnishes the desired clue--since it indicates something of the nature of Norton's writing.

It is sometimes unfair to describe an author's writing in a single phrase. However, Andre Norton's stories, more easily classified than many, might be called "romantic adventure"--akin to tales of island castaways, cowboys and indians, and knightly quests. Her heroes are of epic size; her books, filled with action, peril, and mystery, are rich with complex and colourful descriptions of settings, characters, and societies.

Certain themes occur in story after story. There is the "beast master" theme, a quasi-symbiotic relationship between men and animals that involves some kind of direct mind-to-mind communication. There is the "space-opera," often involving a galactic empire (or two). There is the "ancient race" theme, the concept of an old and mysteriously powerful culture that lurks in the background. There is time travel, and the aftermath-of-atomic-war theme. In addition, nearly all books written since 1963 contain the themes of witch powers and parallel universes.

P. Schuyler Miller claims that a prime attraction of this author's writing is that she introduces many intriguing ideas that are never completely wrapped up at the end of the book, thus leaving something to be filled in by the reader's own imagination. He points out that her stories are ageless in the sense that they are set on exotic and far-flung worlds that science cannot make commonplace (at least in the foreseeable future). But despite everything in her favour her work is stigmatised by the appellation "escape literature."

To this point I have indicated the substance of Miss Norton's writing and the concurrent lack of critical interest. So one naturally asks: why this absence of critical recognition and what can we expect from here on?

During the Fifties and early Sixties literary interest in s.f. shifted to "mental" or subjective events, viewed in themselves or in their relationship to external events in the "real" world --with the adventure story being relegated by critics to the domain of juvenilia. This "demotion" made it easy for critics to dismiss Andre Norton as just another female writer of children's books. (Without trying to settle the question of what is important or acceptable as science fiction, I can observe the snobbery of ignoring work simply because it does not bear the stamp of currently "important" writing.)

Recent years, however, have seen a revival of interest in the fantasy adventures of Burroughs, Howard, Cummings, and Merrit (cited earlier), each of whom offers escape to a world more "natural" than our own, where existence is unspoiled by the artificialities of urban civilisation. Of course, Andre Norton returns directly to the primitive mode only in her beast-master and aftermath-of-atomic-war themes, but in each instance the hero's courage and resourcefulness accomplish what city-bred degeneracy could not. Although her writing lacks a single archetypal figure to represent our primitive selves (like Tarzan or Conan), it belongs to the same general class as Burroughs' and Howard's and so, I believe, will be given the same critical attention these authors are starting to receive.

Also literary veteran like group she  
 o, with her recent Witch World series, Norton shares the  
 ry primitivism exemplified in the Sword and Sorcery of  
 an contemporaries like Leiber and de Camp and newer writers  
 Ted White, Michael Moorcock, and Lir Carter. Amongst this  
 o, perhaps, Andre Norton will receive the type of recognition  
 she lacked while apart from any other.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1) Alice Mary Norton is also known to science fiction readers as Andrew North.
- 2) This is no longer true, with Norton's "Wizard's World" (June 1967) and "The Toys of Tamisen" (April, May 1969), both in Worlds of If. These did not appear until after Lin Carter's preface, which accompanied the third Ace reprinting of Star Guard, early in 1967.
- 3) An exception is P. Schuyler Miller's column in Analog, which gives regular and detailed reviews of Norton's books (over thirty reviews in the past fifteen years). James Blish's The Issue at Hand is not cited above because it is restricted to discussions of science fiction in magazines during a time when Andre Norton published almost nothing in this medium.

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