

The Jargoon Pard by Andre Norton

reviewed by Jennifer Bankier

This book, a part of the Arvon branch of Andre Norton's Witch World series, is significant not so much for the events that take place therein, but rather as a bridge between and reference source for Year of the Unicorn, The Crystal Gryphon, and any future books in the series.

The adventure component of the book is, by Ms. Norton's standards, comparatively uncomplicated and limited in scope. What is likely to be of continuing value to the fans of the series is, instead, the background information provided as to the history of Arvon (which casts light upon events in both the books mentioned earlier) and the principles upon which the magic of that world operates. This latter discussion is of particular interest in view of the fact that most fantasy writers are content merely to describe magic, without giving any thought to the principles that underlie it. The only works that I am familiar with that go beyond this simplistic approach are LeGuin's Earthsea trilogy and Randall Garrett's alternative universe series typified by Too Many Magicians.

The Jargoon Pard poses many intriguing and unanswered questions which hopefully point to further books to come. What or who, for example, are the Voices? What are the future trials for which it is stated in the book the main characters are being tried and strengthened? One hopes that Ms. Norton will not leave these matters unchronicled as she did the victorious struggle mentioned in passing at the end of Sorceress of the Witch World (although, admittedly, the characters and setting in Escore offered far less depth or potential for interesting developments than Arvon and its people).

One aspect of The Jargoon Pard that will hearten people opposed to biological determinism is that Ms. Norton uses what in less skilled hands would be the tired old children-switched-at-birth device as an occasion for emphasizing the superior value of emotional ties over hereditary ones as the basis for shaping character and of healthy relationships between people. For feminists it is also interesting to note that the two women characters who act in the interests of evil do not do so in the context of tired sexist cliches. Instead, the Lady Heroise, the mother of the hero, is clearly a victim of those social rules that deny strong women access to social power in their own right, so that they may be easily tempted to seize power in fact, though not in name, through the domination and manipulation of others, while the Wise Woman Ursilla falls prey to the temptation, which Ms. Norton has in the past made clear is a trap for adepts of any sex, to venture into areas of knowledge that corrupt the user.

The Jargoon Pard is not on a par with the best of Ms. Norton's recent books, such as The Crystal Grypon. It is still, however, a pleasure to read, and a welcome relief from the desert of badly written, boring or sexist science fiction and fantasy stories with which we have lately been afflicted.

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House of Zeor by Jacqueline Lichtenberg

reviewed by Amanda Bankier

House of Zeor is set in a future world where humankind has divided into two complementary mutated strains. The Gens are identical to the present human in appearance, but they produce and store in their bodies a kind of life-energy called selyn which they themselves cannot use. The Simes (presumably from "assimulators") must have an infusion of this energy each month to live, and unfortunately, when they draw it from individual Gens through the six tentacles that grow from each arm in a Sime, the rapid removal of the selyn kills the Gen. There has been, however, another mutation among the Simes, producing individuals known as channels who can draw selyn from any Gen slowly enough not to harm her or him, and then transfer the energy to an ordinary Sime so that he or she need not kill. The channels must draw the selyn at the higher rate when they themselves need it, but some Gens through training and innate ability (possibly a further mutation) can provide the energy quickly without harm to themselves. Such Gens provide the Companions of the channels. Channels and those who use them are regarded as perverts by the ordinary Simes and so live in enclaves called Householdings permitted on sufferance and often subject to attack.

Hugh Valleroy is a Gen who is forced to enter Sime territory in search of Aisha, whom he loves, and who has been captured by Sime raiders. Valleroy is aided by Klyd Farris, the head of Household Zeor, and the story concerns the search for Aisha and Valleroy's contact with the Sime society and his conversion to support of the concept of cooperation between Sime and Gen with the help of the channels.

This is Lichtenberg's first published sf novel, and it shows mainly in the plot. The events move fast, rather in the manner of a musician practising a piece that she does not quite yet have the control to play at the correct tempo, and far too many of the plot twists depend on Valleroy being kept unnecessarily ignorant by Klyd. However, though the premises are often tenuous the action is generally handled well, with the minor exception that an over-use of exclamation marks occasionally gives a comic book-like air to otherwise perfectly acceptable description.