

WOMEN IN THE FICTION OF ANDRE NORTON

For a long time before concern over sexism in SF became wide-spread, Andre Norton had been quietly providing us with strong female characters, and exploring the woman's side of sexist societies in her fantasies and science fiction.

I started reading her fiction in 1959 when there were about fifteen novels available. None of these¹ have a woman as a central character, and only two, The Stars Are Ours and Star Gate, have a female character of any importance at all.

Presumably this, as well as Norton's choice of a male (if slightly ambiguous) pseudonym, resulted from the then current notion of SF as a field suitable only for male readers and writers. Norton did not abide by such restrictions much longer. In 1960 she published Storm Over Warlock which involved an alien matriarchial society, and although the domination of males is not approved of, neither is the society portrayed as ridiculous or more evil than the human one. Shortly thereafter Witch World, one of her finest novels, introduced two very strong and active female characters in Loyse and Jaelithe. In this story the country of Estcarp is a matriarchy and Karsten has only recently abolished matrilineal succession. It is also notable that Estcarp's witches, except for the extent of their powers, are very close to the actual nature of witches in our history, although at the time the book was written the church-sponsored notions of traffic with Satan and so on dominated most fantasy. Jaelithe is shown as wise, powerful, and dominant; Loyse as independent and determined. These qualities and the two women's friendship were most welcome, and at the time rare--contrasts to the stereotyped female characters found elsewhere.

Norton has said, "when I wrote my first heroine-centred book--Ordeal in Otherwhere--the publisher protested against such innovation"² I can well believe it. In this sequel to Storm Over Warlock Charys Nordholm is devoted to knowledge rather than traditional femininity; further, she gets out of problems using her own ingenuity, rescues her male companion, Shann Lantee, twice, and absolutely refuses to be "protected." The scene where she convinces Shann of this last

¹ Star Man's Son, Star Rangers, The Stars Are Ours, The Sargasso of Space, Star Guard, The Crossroads of Time, Plague Ship, Sea Siege, Star Porn, Star Gate, The Time Traders, The Beast Master, Galactic Derelict, The Secret of the Lost Race, and Voodoo Planet.

² Interview in Entropy #7, quoted in Worlds of If, August, 1974.

is very well and subtly done.³ Another thing which no doubt alarmed the publishers just as much is that Charys is "plain" by her society's standards, replacing the "beautiful girl" convention with a touch of realism.

Since she wrote Witch World Norton's work has divided quite firmly into separate streams of fantasy and science fiction. The fantasies are mostly set in the "witch world" in one of a number of countries. The stories might be said to be of the "sword and sorcery" type except that the sword is much less emphasized and that they lack the degree of violence and misogyny common to most examples of the sub-species. A new trend noticeable in the fantasies is that rather than having an exceptional female protagonist operating in the public (male) world, the women's side of society is examined. In the feudal societies shown the domestic duties of women are not given as mere background but as the very basis of survival. Indeed, with the men off hunting and fighting most of the time it is the women who hold the civilization together.⁵ Generally, the women are resigned to their second-class status, but they are realists. They don't romanticize submission, and they have a sharp sense of their own abilities and worth. The powers of magic are largely exercised by women, and almost all the women shown resisting society have these powers to aid them. In this world there is little hope for independent women to break with tradition inside society (except possibly in Estcarp) so most of the heroines find individual solutions in travels to the edge of the unknown.

Most of the science fiction novels form episodes of a loosely integrated far future history. Thousands of planets are colonized by humans, and many more have native races of various levels of advancement. There is no way the attempts at government coordination and law enforcement can work at all well over such distances, so a basically unpleasant sexist, capitalist, authoritarian society with such useful institutions as contractual slavery is further disrupted by piracy, corporate imperialism, and wide-spread organized crime (does this sound familiar?). Most of her protagonists end up falling afoul of both-legal and illegal authorities, and it is in some of these stories that some female characters consciously realize that women are oppressed by their society. Kilda o'Rhyn in Dread Companion runs

3. This might be a good place to note that Shann Lantee is a very good example of the nature of Norton's male characters. Although not passive (which is seldom a good trait in anyone) he has very little will to dominance and relates to Charys on a very equal level. He is capable of realizing when his reactions may be based on prejudice and of trying to modify his behavior.

4. Needless to say, on the paper-back cover she is beautiful, and Shann who it seems fairly clear in the text, is black is depicted as the typical white hero type.

5. In "Dragon Scale Silver" in Spell of the Witch World the women of a refugee group do most of the hunting and fighting as well.

into this directly when all the careers she might fit into are closed to her. Maelen, who comes from the only nearly egalitarian society shown (in Moon of Three Rings) recognizes it in all the women she meets on other planets (in Exiles of the Stars). In Android at Arms Shara's prompt reproof of the surprise of the man from a parallel world that a first captain of the realm's forces might be a woman (in fact two out of four such captains are) suggests that the state of affairs is recent and needs protecting.

As in the fantasies, the women characters are strong and independent as individuals, but seek their self-definition on the fringes of generally sexist societies.

The similarity between the fantasy and science fiction endings leads us to the dissatisfying aspects of Norton's work. Any story not intended as a tragedy is bound to end with the protagonist having found some individual direction in her life, but these endings are still very unrealistic. Usually the woman finds a satisfying occupation which she can pursue as she pleases and is paired off with a male companion. The friendships are all actually or potentially romantic in character. This is a wildly improbable outcome for the women Norton portrays. In the given societies the type of man who would relate to an independent woman as a person would be extremely rare and the chance of such pairings low. Undoubtedly companionship and sex are both important human desires, and to find both in the same person a happy outcome, but it happens much too easily in Norton's books. I can't help feeling that she could if she wished deal effectively with women who are forced to choose their integrity over companionship or who find friendship from several people or from another woman. At the least I think the stories would benefit if the true difficulty of finding and maintaining a relationship of equals was at least hinted at.

There is another disturbing set of attitudes which is that the independent women usually scorn other women who have not rebelled as personally inadequate. It does not occur to them that women might make a common cause against their problems, and in the science fiction (not so much in the fantasy) they rarely have women friends.

Despite these problems Andre Norton has provided more good women in SF than practically anyone else, and started doing it sooner than most. Her use of women has improved continuously, and the incident in Breed to Come may indicate that her treatment of some of the problem areas will change. It will be interesting to watch her future work.

⁶. In fact, there is one occasion in which a subsidiary character, Ayana in Breed to Come, chooses this course.