Andre Norton: A Perspective

by C.J. Cherryh

Andre Norton is one of those people there's no explaining—by which I mean that in this field, like one of the constants of the universe, she just *is*, like matter and energy, no other explanation needed.

Without her, this field would be a lot different, that's one thing you can say. And I suppose if you have to figure out what the science fiction universe would be like if it had never had her input, you could start by saying it might have fewer readers and likely fewer writers—because there sure are a lot of us who, when asked what book started us in science fiction, will name *Star Man's Son* or *Witch World* or any one of—Lord! I've *seen* a complete collection of Andre Norton's books, and it haunts me to this day, sort of like the sight of an unscalable Everest.

It's hard to say exactly why certain few science fiction writers have this particular gift for writing books an adult can love, that still touch the creative spark in a young reader. I think it's that same quality that makes a Robert Louis Stevenson. There's something about *Star Man's Son* or *Treasure Island* either one that, once you read it, especially in your youth, you may forget who wrote it, you may forget the name of every major character, you may forget when you read it or think you dreamed it somewhere like the chap in *The Princess Bride,* but you get your memory jogged and back it comes like an old daydream.

It's a rare thing when you can create a story like that. They aren't always the complex ones, not always the ones that have an intricate structure or style or those sort of things the English departments love to analyze *ad somnium;* Andre Norton's way of working is more purely the storyteller's art, the round-the-fireside kind of story made for rainy days and winter evenings, a common man's kind of story that warms the bones and conjures pictures brighter and more real than where we sit...sometimes not even visual pictures, but an image of the soul—*Oh,* the reader thinks, *I've been there I'm in that situation.* Never mind that this lad has to cope with aliens and critters and goings-on that would turn the hair gray. The most sedate reader can empathize, because while Andre Norton's worlds unfold, so does something inside the reader, completely non-verbal, as if one's self had just sort of grown a size larger.

Andre Norton writes about the courage it takes to just get along and be what we are, in the face of a lot of people who get along by seeming what they're not. And maybe we've all met enough smiling sons and daughters of b----s in our lives that we can empathize. Maybe that's why so many young people have a special affection for Andre Norton, and why those particular stories stick in the subconscious with virtually mythic force.

If Andre Norton hadn't written, a good many fans might have never found their way to the field, and a good many lives would be the poorer—that's one thing you can say with surety. It's hard, once you've been firmly hooked on Andre's stories, and really understand what she's saying, to go off and become one of the smiling s.o.b.'s that make the problems of the world, unless you've got the soul of a crocodile or you only get off on the colored lights or the fuzzy critters instead of the substance of science fiction.

If Andre Norton hadn't left a career filing other people's books and taken to writing her own tales down, a good many writers wouldn't have gotten into the field, or having gotten here, wouldn't write quite the way they've written. Andre Norton helped no few of us through our own identity crises, male and female both; and she contributed to the field in a very unique way by being a first-rate story-teller, accessible to young people as well as adults, and being a woman in what was at the time a stereotypically male domain.

She was writing and published by at least 1947, at which time yours truly was fighting scraps over having her pigtails pulled by the second grade bully. I hadn't read anything of hers yet, but I sure could have used it then.

Where it really mattered, though, was later. You see, if you were a kid of the war years as I was, you were growing up in an era when the gender stereotypes had already been shattered by the participation of women in the war effort; and while Rosie the Riveter might go back to her cottage and her kids

and her returning husband, her daughters grew up seeing Amelia Earhart and the legendary Rosie, Mata Hari, Tokyo Rose, the Dragon Lady of the comic strips, the real women who served in the South Pacific, and who ferried the planes and did heroic things that gave us horizons somewhat wider than our mothers had had. And young girls of my era began to *notice*, mind you, heroic women and women who did things other than traditional. Mine may not have been the protest generation, but we were quietly saying no to counselors who wanted to put us into homemaking, we were fighting regulations that told us we couldn't take certain courses, and we were already discovering that the inertia of custom and vested interests is about equal to that of the galaxy's rotation.

We were the Silent Rebels, and it was generally, if quietly, supposed that as Rosie the Riveter passed from the public eye and the urge to Become Mothers overtook us all we'd settle down.

But the social theorists who predicted we'd go away didn't reckon with another phenomenon: that books are dangerous things. Now, Andre Norton is a little older still than us young hooligans of the war generation; and no knowing where she got *her* impetus to do the extraordinary, probably right down a similar chain leading from some earlier social earthquake, and some book at the right time; but whatever it was, she was there and she was writing.

And when a generation of us who thought we were alone in an uphill battle discovered that several science fiction writers were female, it had a special and unspoken significance, a confirmation that talent does matter more than custom—a theme, you may notice, which has figured in more than one of Andre's books.

Andre Norton may belong to the whole field, but she belongs to a certain group of us in a way that matters very profoundly. Like my generation, she launched no protests, she just *did* what she does, past all the thoughtless rudeness (you mean a *women* wrote that?) and the tendency of reviewers to seek earnestly after traditional significances in uncommon forms and to miss the revolution that occurs in a body of work so untraditional beneath the traditional forms.

Had she not written, some of us would have, but because she wrote, and because she wrote positive stories about people who survive, we daughters of the legendary Rosie, had our own John Campbell to venerate, though she never, till recently, bought a story from any of us. (She's taken to doing that lately too, encouraging a whole new third generation of writers, but that's another matter.)

I read science fiction by many writers when I was young, and no few of them were seminal to what I do. But Andre was one of those special delights, because I began to realize that it wasn't going to be such an uphill struggle to do what I wanted, because she and a handful of others had opened the way.

Moreover, they'd opened the way to a different kind of science fiction. The very fact that women had been barred from the sciences by custom, and in many cases by regulations that kept us from field work or from certain prerequisite experience, tended to push a unique group of minds that might otherwise have ended up in engineering or chemistry or whatever, over into the social sciences, the languages, the lit departments simply because they were the generally available fields that offered sufficient challenge to engage the interest of people who had a natural bent toward the technical—

And the end result was a group of people who practiced a curious fusion of science and literature, which is, of course, exactly what science fiction is in the first place—except that this time, science fiction was being created by a fusion not of the nuts and bolts variety of science, but of the so-called social sciences such as history and anthropology and behavioral science. Andre Norton, by virtue of being who she was, what she was, and when she was, had a strong impact on that particular group of writers, most but not all of whom were female—an influence because she was a successful woman, and an influence because that fusion of history and science fiction was precisely what she had done; to a second group of writers, both male and female, she was an influence simply because she existed and she succeeded.

Publishers, as a rule, truly like to know that what they're buying will sell. And Andre Norton's very existence not only as a successful writer, but as one of those writers who gets stocked and restocked world without end, has had its own influence on how soon a certain number of other things might happen in the field: women being published on a regular basis and the widening of the field to include social science sf. Would it sell, J.B.? Bet your backlist, J.R. I think we got another Andre Norton here.

And not to pass by the fact that more males than females read Andre's work to this day, those being the percentages of male and female in this field, though the gap is steadily narrowing—she has had a very similar effect on men in science fiction; *she* wrote the stories, with heroic females as well as males, which let our brothers do what we were doing—view the world in a non-traditional way; and grow up, perhaps, thinking that someone like Jaelithe or Kaththea of *Witch World* would be a very fine person to know—or even more

earthshaking, to *be*, the way several generations of young women had far more yearned to be John Carter of Mars than Dejah Thoris, simply because the reader of a book had a lot rather be the hero than the bystander.

Andre Norton has won awards beyond counting, including the Grand Master; she's an acclaimed master of science fiction; she's appeared in *LIFE* magazine and appears in any Who's Who worth its salt. She is a woman of definite ideas and definite principles, the sort who takes a position on things, which you might expect. Concerning her own work she has remained modest and sensitive to a fault, which reflects, I think, a working artist who cares profoundly about her craft, and who concentrates more on the struggle to get the present project right than to congratulate herself on past accomplishments.

Being beyond past accomplishments and what this woman did for us twenty years ago, Andre Norton's own work has remained readable and viable—a writer whose work preceded NASA and endures after sf left the solar system, whose work is still read by new generations, while she has gone on actively working on the new forms that have cropped up, from the historical fantasy to the shared universe.

If Andre Norton had not written what she wrote, apart from all the reasons a lot of us have to think of her as special, the field would be the poorer by *Catseye*, the Witch World novels, *Forerunner*,...well, you can read the bibliographies. But the concepts of Terrestrial heritage including more than humankind, done in her unique way—the concepts of the alien friendly as well as the alien menace, transport gates and the perceptions of science as magic, the notions that internal conflict and rebellion against the forms can be carried as a theme inside an adventure plot so that a social consciousness novel doesn't have to be heavy-handed or dreary, all of this quiet revolution in social sensitivity and ecological responsibility would not have reached the audience it did at the time it did, without her; and there would not, at this time when readers are flocking into the field and science fiction has become daily fact, with, Lord help us, academic respectability—be as adequate a body of accessible stories for those readers: because Andre Norton has a knack of explaining without making the reader aware that she's explaining, which is what makes her accessible.

More exactly, she's a master at that very difficult technique of science-fictional expositions, otherwise known as world-building; and, more difficult still, delivery of that world in between the lines of the story in such a way that it just happens. If you're a writer you know what I mean, and if you're not, ask one, and be prepared to sit in the bar a long while understanding how it's done, if the writer you ask can put it in words at all. It's very, very difficult to make the reader think he's always known something if he didn't know it when he picked up the book. Sometimes Andre Norton does it so slickly that even another writer doesn't see her do it, and that's really difficult... It's one of those arts that distinguishes science fiction from almost every other field of fiction; it's what we very aptly call world-building, and sometimes mistake for the diagrams and charts and maps and lists that may lie behind it. (I'm not even sure that Andre uses charts and maps and lists: it may all reside in her head and land on the paper at the right moment, but most of us mortals make physical lists—and even agonize over just where to put what.) However she does it, it's something historical fiction and contemporary fiction doesn't much have to do: a historical can give just a sketchy description, and let the reader do the work. But on the art of constructing images and histories of what never existed yet—on that art our whole field lives and breathes. It is profoundly difficult to do well, and it is profoundly ironic that those writers who carry it to its highest level do it so smoothly that a good many analysts aren't aware of the skill involved in doing it: Andre Norton is one of those sleight-of-hand artists who always knows exactly how much to tell to get you to see a thing and to believe that you know a whole lot about the background that you've never seen at all. Study step by step what she tells you and how she tells it and when she reveals a thing, and you will know more about world-building than any college course in science fiction writing is likely to teach you.

But those are the things that a writer would tend to care about. What a reader cares about is the stories. And being a reader myself, and having not only grown up with them, but having the pleasure of going on reading new ones, and seeing Andre prove the exception again and pile up an Everest of books and remain a creative force in the field through transitions of technology and style and all the changes in a constantly changing world, proves her to be rather like her characters—there's something inside that's constant by the very means of change itself, *constans mutandis*, which still keeps her out front of the rest of us.