



the ASBESTOS SHELF

book reviews by
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Bill Donaho's comment (p. 36) that he buys all Andre Norton's books has caused me to go into a deep (well, deeper than usual) consideration of my opinion of her writing. When I was around 11 or 12, she was one of my favorite authors. Lately, I've been criticizing her as a one-plot hack - and Indians-in-Outer-Space is a pretty corny plot, at that. But I still read every word she writes. So, do I like her stuff, or not?

Since this is an informal criticism, it will digress all over the place. The first digression will be to tell you about how Norton's books led me on one of my finest literary treasure hunts.

It was about six years ago, after I'd read all her sf, that I decided to read all her non-sf books, too. Since I wasn't faunching particularly madly after them, I decided to avoid the library card catalogs and Library of Congress listings as the Easy Ways Out, and make a leisurely search based on the usual list of "works also by this author" to be found opposite the title page of most books. I found about a half-dozen titles listed in one of her sf books. As luck would have it, they were all in the Main downtown LA Public Library together at the time, so I checked them all out, and read them with pleasure - ranging from a Western to one of the Carlovingian romances - over the next two weeks. But as I was about to return them, I checked the lists again to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Lo and behold! the oldest of them had a book mentioned that the others didn't include. I tracked down this mysterious one - a wartime adventure - and there found note of another Norton volume! I finally found this - a children's mystery, written in 1938 (and I'd been thinking of Norton as a new writer) - and it listed her as the author of still another book. I haven't yet found this first book of hers, but I daresay I will in time. The treasure hunt is still on, and half the fun is in the search.

But for you Andre Norton fans who find sheer enjoyment in every word she writes, and who don't care to make an involved project out of looking for her books, I'll list her non-sf books here.

First, 2 books I haven't read yet. All I have so far is the Library of Congress information; fortunately they have fairly descriptive titles.

"The Prince Commands, being sundry adventures of Michael Karl, sometime crown prince & protender to the throne of Morvania." Appleton-Century, 1934. 268 p., illus.

"Follow the Drum, being the ventures and misadventures of one Johanna Lovell, sometime lady of Catkept manor in Kent county of Lord Baltimore's proprietary of Maryland, in the gracious reign of King Charles the Second." Wm. Penn Pub. Corp., 1942. 312 p.

And now, her books that I have read, with brief summaries:

Ralestone Luck Appleton-Century, 1938. 296 p., illus. When young Rupert and Val Ralestone, and their sister Rickey, inherit the dilapidated old Louisiana mansion that is the last legacy of the Lords of Lorne, they are more interested in making a home than in dreaming of past family glories. But they are soon forced to take old legends seriously and begin a search for the lost family treasure, to prove that they, and not a rival claimant, are the true heirs to the estate. (This may sound like just another juvenile mystery, but it's really rather good - or at least it's much better than the "Nancy Drew" series that my sister reads.)

The Sword is Drawn Houghton Mifflin, 1944. 178 p., illus. When the Nazis invade the Netherlands, young Lorens van Norreys, heir to a world-famous Dutch jewelry concern, joins the Allies, first to fight the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies, later returning to his occupied homeland to smuggle out priceless family art treasures and to help the Underground against the Nazis.

"Rogue Reynard. Being a tale of the Fortunes and Misfortunes and divers Misdeeds of that great Villain, Baron Reynard, the Fox, and how he was served with King Lion's Justice. Based upon The Beast Saga." Houghton Mifflin, 1947. 96 p., illustrated. A novelized version of the old animal tale of how Reynard, the fox, refuses to come to court to answer his accusers, first tricking the King's bailiffs, later falling into complete knavery; and how he is finally captured and dealt with. Written for a very young audience, but still enjoyable to adults, especially those who like medieval settings. Profusely illustrated in the "picture book" style by Laura Bannon.

"Scarface. Being the Story of one Justin Blade, late of the Pirate Isle of Tortuga, and how Fate did justly deal with him, to his great Profit." Harcourt-Brace, 1948. 263 p., illus. By 1692, the heyday of the pirates was over, but Capt. Cheap, the most notorious villain of the day, insisted in raiding under the very nose of Sir Robert Scarlett, ex-pirate himself and now pirate-hunting Governor of Barbados, as part of a strange plan of revenge for Scarlett's desertion of the Brethren. But this is the story of Scarface, the young prisoner-cabin boy who had been with Cheap as long as he could remember. How Scarface comes free of the pirates, begins to fashion an honest life for himself, then is recaptured by Cheap; all before discovering his true identity; makes for a rousing good Norton-type action story.

Sword in Sheath Harcourt-Brace, 1949. 246 p., illus. Lawrence Kane and Sam Marusaki, ex-OSS men, journey to Indonesia after the war in a search for a downed bomber pilot who may still be alive on one of the islands. With Lorens van Norreys, who is seeking to re-establish the old family jewel business, they run into an uncharted island of legendary fame, Moro pirates searching for treasure, and escaped Nazi and Jap war holdouts, before they are through.

"Huon of the Horn; being a tale of that Duke of Bordeaux who came to sorrow at the hands of Charlemagne and yet won the favor of Oberon, the Elf King, to his lasting fame and great Glory." Harcourt-Brace, 1951. 208 p., illus. A newly novelized version, based on the 1534 English translation, of the old Carolingian legend of the youthful Duke of Bordeaux: how he slew the Emperor's evil son in fair combat, and was forced to go on a quest that led him through Saracen realms and other evil and dangerous places; that won him a fair wife and ultimately, after many adventures, a place of high honor in Faerie. Another book aimed at a young audience, which adults (especially Andre Norton fans) will enjoy.

(You'll have noted that these books are being presented chronologically. Norton's first sf novel, Star Man's Son, 2250 A.D. (Harcourt-Brace, 1952. 248 p., illus.) was written at this point.)

At Swords' Points Harcourt-Brace, 1954. 279 p. When Stark Anders is killed in the Netherlands, a cryptic note leads his younger brother, Quinn, to Stark's friend, Lorens van Norreys. Van Norreys reveals that he has organized members of the old Underground into a private espionage service through his jewel firm ("though war is officially over, the struggle between warring ideologies still goes on", as the jacket blurb puts it), and that Stark had been working privately on the trail of a set of fabulously valuable gem-encrusted statuettes that disappeared over a hundred years ago. Quinn, with van Norreys' help, takes up the search, to find the lost Bishop's Menie, and the rival organization, led by a nameless Eurasian, that killed his brother.

Yankee Privateer World, 1955. 300 p., illus. In 1779, young Fitzhugh Lyon, on his way to join the Colonial Armies, is shanghaied into the newly-formed U.S. Marines, aboard a privateer. He is determined to escape and fight the British the way he wants to, but before he can, the privateer is captured. Fitz and the captain escape from their English prison, but as Fitz is travelling in disguise to a Yankee rendezvous point, he falls in with the English branch of his family, a once-powerful estate long gone in corruption and decay (similar in mood to Those Others in The Stars Are Ours! and Star Born). Whether Fitz will accept the dying lord's offer to make him the next heir of the Lyons of Starr, or whether he will return to his Marine shipmates, should be a foregone conclusion to all true Norton fans.

Stand to Horse Harcourt-Brace, 1956. 242 p. This is the story of Ritchie Peters, a raw recruit in the Army's 1st Dragoons stationed in Santa Fe in 1859, and how he adjusts to the desert and mountains of the West, becoming an accepted member of his post in its constant fight against nature and the Apaches.

Shadow Hawk Harcourt-Brace, 1960. 237 p., map. Set in Egypt in 1590 B.C., this tells of the expulsion of the Hyksos invaders by the Pharaohs, after 400 years of foreign rule. The hero is Rahotep, a young Egyptian nobleman whose estates had been confiscated by the Hyksos, who re-established his fortune in the face of both Hyksos domination and Egyptian court intrigue.

Ride Proud, Rebel! World, 1961. 255 p. A Civil War story. How young Drew Rennie comes to manhood while fighting for the Confederacy.

Andre Norton has also collaborated with Grace Allen, as "Allen Weston", to write Murders for Sale, a Hamond, Hamond "Cloak and Dagger mystery". (London, 1954, 240 p.)

But let's quit digressing and get back to the subject at hand. Is Andre Norton a one-plot writer, or isn't she?

I say yes.



She has a good plot, I admit, and she dresses it up in many ways, but of all her books that I have read, there are only four (Sword in Sheath, Star Rangers, The Crossroads of Time, and Voodoo Planet) in which the plot cannot be defined simply as a youth's proving his manhood.

Andre Norton's first love is plainly science fiction. Since her first sf story in 1952, she has written 21 sf novels, plus editing 3 sf anthologies and the Jameson "Bul-lard" stories. She consistently gets good reviews. I'm sure you've all seen P. S. Miller's admittedly enthusiastic praise of her works: "There is a kind of science fic-tion that will never go out of style, and Andre Norton writes it." (ASF, July 1962). S. E. Cotts says, "The deeds she describes are robust, with many of the qualities of the old epic poems." (AMZ, June 1962).

And they are right. But it is the same style; they are the same deeds. Cotts ad-mits he is reviewing a reprint of an old book. As it happens, it is Norton's first sf book, written when there was still some variety of plot setting and detail among the stories. But lately, even the individual details have become stereotyped.

The hero is a lad in his late teens. He is a member of a minority group; racial, social, or ideological. From his outcast status, he has risen to a barely-tolerated position among a group of his culture's male social elite (usually a Heinleinesque mili-tary organization). The group is attacked and destroyed; only the hero, the group's most experienced and respected member, and some animals with which the hero has established a semi-telepathic contact, escape. They are forced to undergo a long and dangerous journey before they can reach safety. Somewhere along the way, the hero is separated from his companions. Alone, he encounters one of the planet's most vicious predators and vanqui-shes it singlehandedly, thus proving that he has finally reached Manhood. At the end, he receives his reward: not praise, but quiet acceptance into the social group as an equal, due to his own merits.

This plot, with a few variations, can serve as a description of most of the stories Norton has written in the last four years. Storm Over Warlock. The Beast Master. The Sioux Spaceman. Catseye. Sargasso of Space, and to a lesser extent, Plague Ship. The Time Traders and its two sequels; even though the hero of Galactic Derelict and The De-fiant Agents is the same, he must go through his Rite of Manhood again. Even her recent non-sf novels are showing this pattern; Stand to Horse and The Beast Master are almost identical in setting, despite the fact that one is set on Earth and the other on an alien planet.

It's not a bad plot. As I said, I'll read Norton's every word, even if they're almost exactly like each other. But I maintain that, good or not, Andre Norton has be-come a one-plot author. She hasn't always been one, and I hope she will go on to new ideas in her future works. But right now, she's in a rut.

To her credit, she seems to be developing in at least one respect. In the same re-view quoted above, S. E. Cotts said, "her complete exclusion of any romantic tinges, or indeed, of any characters who happen to be female by accident of birth, is ... unrealis-tic". Lately, however, she has shown signs of noticing her own sex. The native alien race in Storm Over Warlock is a matriarchial one. In The Defiant Agents, set on the pla-net Topaz, her Apache hero encounters a pretty Mongol girl. The romantic interest could hardly be called torrid; her attractiveness lies firstly in the fact that she has the spirit of a warrior. Later, when the Apache decide to use a Mongol in baiting a trap, and settle on the girl, the hero feels a strange reluctance even though he agrees out of logical considerations. ("Kaydessa? Though something within him rebelled at that selec-tion for the leading role in their drama, Travis could see the advantage of Buck's choice." p. 169.) At the end, when she escapes from the Reds, the hero is happy to learn she is safe. "She had an excellent reason to hate him, yet he hoped ..." (p. 214). What he hoped is never explained; it certainly can't be any deep emotion because, after this brief men-tion, he completely forgets about her for the final ten pages of the book.

Norton's latest, Eye of the Monster (ACE #F-147) breaks the set pattern. Not to any great extent; the plot is still of a teen-age hero escaping across hundreds of miles of hostile jungle on an alien planet to the nearest Earthman settlement, proving in the pro-cess that he was Man enough to do it. But the hero is not an Amerind, and he does not communicate telepathically with any animals. Also, the alien with whom he escapes is definitely female (one of the felinoid Salariki, the race introduced in Plague Ship, making this one of the Free Traders series, even though the Traders only get a one-line mention), though their relationship is still purely platonic.

So I feel there's hope for the future. I've always looked forward to reading Nor-ton's books; I'll be waiting more eagerly than ever now that there's a chance that, new book or not, I won't know step by step what's going to happen.

Now about The Green Odyssey. To quote a current British controversy, "I think you're misleading your readers." I "like fantasy, humor, buckles of swash and hairbreadth action, and darn good stories". That's why I didn't like The Green Odyssey. To me it is the dullest kind of hackwork, an obvious pot boiler. I don't believe for a minute that Farmer was creating any kind of vicarious adventure for himself; he was just churning out words. All of the characters just go through the motions of swashing. If the story had been at all convincing I would have enjoyed it very much as I do like this sort of thing. I was very disappointed in it when I read it when it first came out and I reread it about a year ago to see if possibly it was my mood on the first reading, rather than the book itself. But I had the same reaction.

It is possibly significant that I also disliked de Camp's Viagens series (even though de Camp is ordinarily one of my favorite sf authors). But I actively disliked the Viagens series and I was mostly just bored by The Green Odyssey. You see what I want out of swashbuckling fantasy action is vicarious adventure. When I read the story I want to live it. I'm not at all interested in realistic characterization, in fact I prefer heroic. But in any case I want characters whom I can identify with doing things I would like to do. The characters in the Viagens series were depressing clods, almost completely unlikeable, who went through their adventures in a remarkable pedestrian manner. Even completely uncharacterized stick figures would be better. Now this is all quite realistic and all, much truer to life, etc., but I'm certainly not interested in anything realistic when I'm reading fantasy, or even contemporary or historical swashbuckling action.

The Green Odyssey was better in that it had likeable characters, but again they went through their adventures in a remarkably routine manner. De Camp and Farmer are both old pros who can put together a story very well, but in neither case here did one get the impression that they were creating a fantasy that they personally were interested in; this wasn't their type of scene and because it wasn't, they didn't succeed in putting it over to me. Contrast them with the Conan stories. ((All the Conan stories -- or just the ones Howard wrote?)) Conan was obviously real to Howard and Conan's adventures were intensively vivid day dreams to him. This comes across to the reader too. Conan is a tremendously real and vital giant of a character. Of course a lot of people don't like the Conan stories--even people who normally like swashbuckling fantasy, so perhaps the lack of sales of the Acc Conan the Conqueror isn't an adequate test of the popularity of the genre--because they can't stand Conan. And Conan so dominates the stories that if you don't like him, you're not going to enjoy the stories.

Of course you said that The Green Odyssey caught you up and carried you along with the story. It didn't me--nor a lot of other people who ordinarily like sword and sorcery stuff. I don't ordinarily agree with Schuyler Miller, but I definitely agree with everything he said in that review you quoted. ((I don't know... I've reread The Green Odyssey, and I still think it's great fun. I suppose my standards aren't as high as yours -- I note that beside this and the Viagens series, we also disagree as to the enjoyability of some of the Coventry material. As reading tastes are primarily emotional, and not logical, I guess it's every man for himself. I just hope that a majority of the material in SAL is to your liking.))

However, another place I agree with Miller is in regard to Andre Norton who is one of my two or three favorite sf writers now writing. And the only sf writer whose hardcover books I buy, paying full price for. But they aren't swashbuckling adventure ((Have you read her pirate novel, Scarface?) and so outside the scope of this discussion--I just wanted to get in a dissenting vote to your judgment of her.)) My absolute favorite sword and sorcery is de Camp and Pratt's Harold Shea stories. They are so much my favorite that they don't have close rivals (unless you consider Burroughs' Tarzan and cave-man-type stories sword and sorcery which I don't). Then comes Burroughs' John Carter stories, H. Rider Haggard, etc. ((Pyramid put out a pb edition of The Incomplete Enchanter in 1960, and has reissued it this year, adding The Castle of Iron, so apparently it's selling. This is a Good Sign.))

As you may have gathered I'm one of the ones who doesn't care too much for Conan. And--although Gather, Darkness! is one of my top favorite books--I don't care much for the Grey Mouser stories, possibly because I don't like my sorcery evil and dank and all that.....

Anyhow, SALAMANDER is a damn good zine and keep it coming this way.