

# Sorcery for initiates

ANDRE NORTON:

*The Crystal Gryphon*

Gollancz. £1.50. (575 01616 7)

The problem for a prolific author, and Andre Norton is surely that, is the increase in critics' nonchalance. So long as the standard seems to be maintained, the products, in this case more than sixty books at the rate of three a year, may go unremarked beyond the nod of acknowledgment. But readers grow and change. Those who know Miss Norton's space fictions may not even be aware of her historical fantasies, or, at the start, may mistake the one for the other.

Those who know Miss Norton's work well appreciate her highly. She belongs to the group of writers whose books appear on lists for the young as the result of shrinkage in the adult novel, although her readers might be of any age over twelve. The background of her stories is a literary one and includes myth and legend and the high tone and seriousness of epic, the dark and brooding matters of tragedy—more Senecan than modern, for in the lives of the heroes much is to be suffered when little can be done to strive against the violence of fate. At first approach, the reader's difficulty is to share the author's context.

*The Crystal Gryphon* belongs to the category of historical fantasy of the kind that readers may approach through Rosemary Sutcliff or Peter Dickinson. Indeed, Miss Norton and Miss Sutcliff share a common theme in the heroic tale which generates a linguistic and tonal similarity, difficult for the novice, spellbinding for the initiate. For new readers to make the most of her remarkable qualities they should have someone who already appreciates and understands them to discuss them with. *The Crystal Gryphon*, far from being simply the latest in a series, seems an ideal starting place.

The structure is admirably clear, yet subtle. The hero, Kerovan, and the heroine, Joisan (the blurb spelling is wrong), tell, in alternate chapters, of the events which bring them together eight years after their betrothal. Kerovan, the only son of a dale lord in the age after the Old Ones, was born under a curse and

rejected by his mother. Instead of feet he has cloven hooves and his eyes are an unusual amber colour. He feels he would be shunned by any maiden. To secure his succession he is betrothed by proxy, while still a child, to Joisan, niece of another lord, but by the time of the marriage the dales have been invaded and the kingdoms sequestered. The might of the invaders is curiously allied to the sorcery which is the dark side of the lore of the Old Ones, while Kerovan and Joisan, by faith and truth, are linked to the intelligence that is life-enhancing, symbolized by the crystal gryphon which Kerovan finds on the edge of the waste and sends as a bride token.

Besides sharing the author's context of legendary tale, the reader has to accept the symbolism of the underlying value structure: simple faith and truth, honour, valour, the cycle of time, the significance of word-bond and kinship, all of which are embodied in the characters and

the atmosphere. Power is generated by obedience to the nature of things, by stones that have lain in the earth or other talismanic objects whose significance the reader is bound to accept. It is in the nature of Miss Norton's spellbinding that he does so. Set in a time out of time, with a past that looms uncertainly over a present that is still ancient, this heroic tale generates its own linguistic style. Certain word-forms distance it from the reader: "unfriend", "blood-claim", "birthing", the speech of the characters and the forms of greeting and cursing. The convention is well enough established by Rosemary Sutcliff, Ursula Le Guin and others to cause the experienced reader no qualms, but it is to Miss Norton's credit that she maintains the heightened phraseology with no loss of credulity. To those who have been sceptical about the effective continuance of this gifted writer this book offers a chance to begin again; and to the rest of us, a distinctive experience.

## Authentic Homer

JAMES REEVES:

*The Voyage of Odysseus*

Illustrated by Eric Fraser.

Blackie. £2.50. (216 89630 4)

There simply is no doubt about it, the *Odyssey* is one whale of a good story. It's very easy to see why the Penguin translation sold by the million—and to people who actually read the thing, what's more. It is the first picaresque novel, held together by a psychological exactness which makes the characters live far beyond the printed page and containing within itself the seeds of countless later works. It is unputdownable, yet cast as the perfect serial story. Adventure, fantasy, violence and the most moving tenderness are all there. No wonder people remembered it down all the years, when lesser tales were long forgotten.

James Reeves is a writer and a poet with a happy knack of getting very close to the imagination of an earlier age without in any way

condescending to it or over-complicating it. He possesses that rare gift of unforced confidence which allows him to tell a good story with the simplicity it deserves. Much of his work has been in retelling fairy tales or classics for the young, yet he remains quite free from the twin vices of coyness and pomposity. In an age of personalities he is both consistently good and entirely self-effacing. His original work contains a strong vein of the gently fantastic humour which has characterized so many of the best English writers for children. If he can be compared with any of these, it is probably with Andrew Lang.

In his retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, published under the title of *The Voyage of Odysseus*, the combination of story and storyteller work their inevitable, irresistible magic. This is authentic Homer, crunching bones and all; neither a bloodless crib nor a watered-down dose of baby-food but probably as good an introduction to a great classic as one could get.

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