

Andre Norton: The Mother of Us All

by Joan D. Vinge

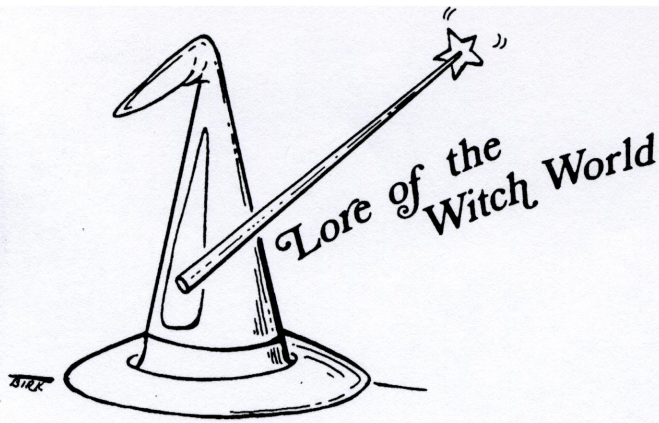
Andre Norton has been writing for over fifty years now, and writing science fiction and fantasy for over forty years, which must seem as amazing to her as it probably does to most of her readers. She is one of the most prolific and popular authors working in the field today, as the numbers of her fans and the sales of her books continue to prove.

When I first began speaking to sf groups, I used to take an informal poll, to see what book had inspired people's love of science fiction. Almost invariably, it was either a book by Robert Heinlein—or Andre Norton. (Her *Storm Over Warlock* did it for me.) That fact fascinated me, especially since I have often felt her work did not get the kind of critical attention and appreciation it deserved. That lack of attention is being remedied at last, and I am honored to have a part in exploring what Andre Norton has meant to sf—to the people who work in the field as well as those who love it.

There is an immediate and obvious explanation for why Andre has been responsible for getting so many fans started reading science fiction. (Note: I'm using "science fiction" here to mean either sf or fantasy, as they do in bookstores.) Like Heinlein, she has written a lot of books, and some of the best of them were originally published as young adult novels. Most people who are destined to read science fiction come to it in a "window" between the ages of 8 and 14, probably because when you're young you're used to encountering and accepting concepts you don't completely understand as you read a book. That makes it easier to accept the often difficult or strange ideas that are the heart of a good sf novel.

Anyone can pick up and read one science fiction novel, of course; but it has to be a good, entertaining one, or the reader is not going to feel that thrill of "where has this been all my life?" and start searching for more of the same. Speaking from personal experience, what makes an Andre Norton book the first of many for most readers is the sense of wonder it evokes. "Sense of wonder" is an over-used term, but in the case of Andre's work, it's the one that comes to my mind over and over. One of the things that I (and I assume most people who prefer sf) love is the feeling that I'm actually on another world, in another time—in a strange wonder-filled place. The feeling that things the way they are aren't things as they always have to be. There is an almost mythic feel to many of Andre's books; it's that quality which gives readers the magical sense of being part of a greater universe. Even after reading sf for most of my life, I still get that feeling when I pick up one of my favorite Norton novels.

Andre has produced over a hundred books at this point (not counting the shared-world anthologies her work has recently inspired). In them she has spun stories around almost every classic concept in science fiction, running the gamut from time travel and galactic empires to the medieval magic and quests of high fantasy. She has also written historical and adventure novels, as well as westerns, romances, and a number of children's books.



For many years she worked as a librarian in Cleveland, Ohio. She obviously loved the access it gave her to a wealth of fascinating information, because she used that information in her books to make her created worlds (real or imaginary) come vividly alive. Her work is so varied that a new reader could conceivably read nothing but Andre Norton and still have a good understanding of virtually every theme and topic in the sf genre—not to mention a unique grounding in history and anthropology. (For my own part, Andre not only got me started reading sf, she also led me to a college degree in anthropology, because her novel *The Time Traders* evoked Northern Europe four thousand years ago so hauntingly that it made me obsessed with European prehistory. While doing a term paper on the Beaker Folk, I was convinced that I had found and studied some of the same source material she must have used for the novel.)

Starting in the mid-sixties Andre began to concentrate more on fantasy; before that her work had been primarily straight sf (with a few exceptions such as the early *Huon of the Horn*). She remarked in an interview in 1974 that she had become somewhat disenchanted with technology, that “the more research I do the more I am convinced that when western civilization turned to machines...they threw away parts of life...[the lack of which] leads to much of our present frustration.” Her attempt to explore those missing parts of life in her work led her to yet another phase in her career, one which would probably be her most successful: Beginning with *Witch World*, she launched a tremendously popular fantasy series, which has continued to grow into the present, and which has recently spun off the above-mentioned “shared world” books, *Tales of the Witch World*.

Fantasy was not nearly as large or as popular a part of the science fiction field in the sixties as it is today, and a part of fantasy’s growth in popularity is undoubtedly due to Andre leading fans of her science fiction off into that new unexplored territory; when they got there, they found they liked it as much as she did.

Andre Norton’s popularity stems mostly from the fact that she is a prolific author whose work transports readers with wonder while (painlessly) broadening their horizons. But her most important contribution to the field is a subtler thing, one that most readers probably do not even think about when they read and enjoy her work: She was one of the first, and probably the most prolific, of the writers who wrote socially aware, humanistic science fiction. Back in the days when typically Jack or Bob the All-American Boy hopped into a spaceship and flew to another

planet, and it was just like 1950s America there, her characters—even (gasp) her heroes—represented a Rainbow Coalition of people from a wide variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. (My favorite character of hers will always be Shann Lantee, a kind of “Heinz 57” of humanity.)

Her heroes were not typical lantern-jawed macho men, rulers of all they surveyed, either. They were often the universe’s underdogs—not the pseudo-underdogs who turned out to be ridiculously superior to any alien just because they were human, but genuine outcasts: the hopeless, the homeless, people who had been persecuted and disenfranchised. And typically, in the course of the novel, these characters not only coped with the fresh difficulties visited on them during the course of the plot, but resolved their personal problems and were forced to revise their own low self-esteem upward; they triumphed, but their triumphs were internal, real, not external and grandiose. Men and women worked together as equals, as did humans and a wide variety of animals with whom they shared their trials, and usually an empathic or telepathic bond as well. The lessons these stories taught were valid not only to the teenager just discovering science fiction, but to virtually anyone who was recognizably a human being—because who has never felt the need for that kind of reinforcement and reassurance?

Not only were her characters not all WASPs, they were not all males, either. As far back as 1942 she wrote an historical novel, *Follow the Drum*, which featured a strong, courageous, uncompromised woman protagonist. Just as she has never stereotyped her men, she has never written a novel in which the female characters, major or minor, were the kind of stereotypical subhumans who were so common in most science fiction novels for decades.

Her sf novel *Ordeal in Otherwhere*, written in the early mid-sixties, featured as its lead character a female hero, who came from a world on which equality between the sexes was the norm. At that time, well before the feminist movement was widely recognized, a genuinely heroic woman was a genuinely radical premise to find in a science fiction novel. But Andre could get away with it, because her work was extremely popular. Her contemporaries dealt regularly with the same science-fictional concepts that Andre used, but very few combined them as effectively with a sociological perspective on the human condition, if they dealt with the human condition at all. (*Ordeal in Otherwhere*’s female protagonist amazed and fascinated me when I first read the novel, just as Andre’s various ethnic male heroes had already done.)

Before Andre Norton started writing, people who liked her kind of fiction had virtually nothing to satisfy the “missing part” in their reading. Her work was seminal, along with the work of a few others like Sturgeon and Simak, in creating a whole new aspect of sf for readers hungry to read about real people coping with unique circumstances. And because books do have a lasting effect on at least some of the people who read them, she has certainly left a lot of readers better people for having read her work.

Most people don’t think consciously about their role models; they absorb the attitudes of individuals and works they admire unconsciously. In that sense, a writer’s work is far more important than the apparent critical response to it, which is why the influence

of Andre's work is greater than many people realize, not only on readers but on writers in the field as well.

Inventions cannot happen until there is an evolutionary milieu, a background to support them. In that sense, the work of Andre Norton (and the few other writers like her) in the fifties and sixties laid the groundwork for most of today's writers of sociological and anthropological sf. They provided the new perceptions, the heredity and environment, for what is now a major part of the science fiction field.

Andre, as a woman writing immensely popular novels at a time when very few women wrote in the field at all, was herself a role model, as well as providing role models in her work. She wrote under a male pseudonym, because most women sf writers (as well as writers of "adventure for boys", which was her first field) up until the social changes of the sixties had to use a pseudonym, initials, or names that were intentionally androgynous in order to "pass" and find acceptance with a readership that was at the time largely male. (She was born Alice Mary Norton, but she is now legally Andre Alice Norton; after all this time, it's not "a male pseudonym"—it's who she is.) For many years she wrote while working as a librarian, running her own household, and caring for her mother. As anyone, male or female, who has ever tried to do that much at once knows, it's not easy.

Her gender was something of an open secret at the time I first discovered her work, although I had read several of her novels before I found a library book that gave away the secret of who she really was. I did not immediately resolve to become a science fiction writer someday, but the fact that it was actually a woman writing the books I loved so much made a terrific impression on me. And I'm sure I was not alone. A great many women began writing science fiction in the late sixties and early seventies; people often used to ask me why I thought it had happened like that. I thought then (and still do) that it was because most of the women writers I knew, including myself, were feminists, and that the message of feminism was "If you want to do that, why not try it?" Women have always read more sf than most people realized, and the kind of person who is open-minded enough to enjoy the alternate realities of science fiction is often strongly attracted to social movements that offer new solutions to old problems.

Most writers of science fiction come, not surprisingly, from the



ranks of its readers. (If you don't like or understand sf, you are unlikely to want to write it. And those outsiders who do try usually fail.) Andre Norton's writing was not only humanist but also feminist, before there was really even a word for it. And, speaking from personal experience, the influence of her prolific, compassionate, liberated writing must have inspired a great many of today's women writers—as well as men—to ask "Why not?" and become what they are, whether they were consciously aware of her part in their fate or not.

It is impossible to know how many writers' work she has influenced, again because everything a writer reads is grist for the mill, and will have an effect, positive or negative, on the stories they eventually turn out. But writers tend to write the kind of thing they like to read, and as fans they've read a lot of her books. And there are a great many writers now who deal with realistic human (or alien) beings who struggle and triumph in settings that resonate with a sense of myth. Some idea of the respect in which Andre is held by many of her peers and proteges can be gotten from the table of contents of the anthology *Moonsinger's Friends*, edited by Susan Schwartz as a tribute to Andre from writers who love her work. A partial list includes Marion Zimmer Bradley, Anne McCaffrey, Tanith Lee, Poul Anderson, Jane Yolen, Katherine Kurtz, and C.J. Cherryh (and an afterword by Joan D. Vinge).

Another equally valid reason why Andre deserves recognition for her influence on writers in the genre is the time she has always given to supporting new young talent in the field. She takes the time to read all the many galleys sent to her each year for quotes; and she gives many quotes every year to help sell those books she feels her fans will honestly enjoy. In the *Witch World* anthology series she has begun editing, she asked a number of lesser-known writers to contribute, wanting to give them a break instead of concentrating only on the already-famous.

After I learned that Andre Norton was a woman, I used to compose endless letters to her in my mind. I never had the nerve to actually write to her until after I became a published writer myself. Since then I have both written to (and about) her and talked to her on the phone, and my husband Jim Frenkel has edited a number of her books. But Andre until recently has attended few conventions, and I've never met her in person. I can't wait. I hope you can't either, because there's nothing writers appreciate more than hearing from readers how much their books are loved; and Andre richly deserves your tribute.

PS: If you haven't ever read one of her books (where have you been?), here are some of my favorites. I hope you enjoy them as much as I have.

Storm over Warlock
The Time Traders
Lavender-Green Magic
Catseye
Forerunner Foray
Night of Masks
Galactic Derelict
Witch World
Ordeal in Otherwhere
Scarface (historical)
Follow the Drum (historical)