

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Jay Watts (February 2020)

Jay Watts has been a collector of Andre Norton's work for over 40 years. And he has been researching Norton and her work for that long as well. He is a representative of the Andre Norton Estate. And he runs <http://Andre-Norton-Books.com>.

John DeLaughter: What themes was she most drawn to?

Jay Watts: Her personal library contained a wide variety of items including but not limited to Victorian architecture and gardens, folk tales, cats (of course), Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon sagas, archaeology, the occult and witch craft, general history and oh so much more.

As for writing – she would say she was a “fantasy” writer even though she tried her hand in so many different genres that it becomes mind-boggling (at least to me). Her action adventures of the 30s and 40s were written because that was what sold at the time. She did a lot of science fiction but she was anti-technology at heart. This is why most of her sci-fi never went into tech stuff, she preferred to “land-em and get-em off the ship as fast as possible.” She’s done gothic love stories, murder mysteries, historical novels, young adult stories, children stories, alternate world novels, time travel, westerns and more. Andre just wanted to be good story teller. Well, I think she managed that alright.

Robert Matthew Knuckles: I've never read any of Norton's books, so what books do fans, or even Norton herself, recommend to newbies?

Jay Watts: WOW – how to answer that. I really can't, because first I would have to know from the questioner what genre they were most interested in, for Andre wrote in almost all of them. Between her novels and her short stories she has 360+ titles to her name. She has published works dating from 1934 until her death in 2005. There are only a few (say – less than 5) of her books that I didn't like, and no I won't name them. So my answer is, go to the following list and pick one. I'm sure you will like it, and if not try at least one more. I'm positive you will see what I'm talking about. <http://andre-norton-books.com/titles-alphabetical/title-listings/titles-by-genre>

John DeLaughter: What was her favorite(s) of her own novels?

Jay Watts: The answer to that changed over the years.

In a 1972 interview in *Luna Monthly* she said “Among my non-sf titles, I am proudest of *Stand to Horse* (1956). In sf, I think the *Witch World* books give me the most pleasure when working on them, but I have no one book.” In 1989 in an interview with *Starlog Magazine* she said that she was particularly proud of *Year of the Unicorn* (1969) a *Witch World* book based on *Beauty and the Beast*. In a 1998 fanzine called *Pirate Writings* she said “I cannot say that any book was my particular favorite. I found each one a challenge to be handled as best I could, in very recent years, I liked *Hands of Lyr* (1994) very much.”

John DeLaughter: Who did she read? What were some of her favorites by other authors?

Jay Watts: The short answer is anybody and anything she came across. I know she would read anything anybody sent her (including manuscripts) and she was very quick to critique what she read and tell the writer even if they did not ask.

Over the years her answer to that question would change. In 1965 it was *H. Beam Piper, Poul Anderson, Keith Laumer, Eric Frank Russell* were amongst her favorites. For sword and sorcery she particularly liked *Leigh Brackett* and *Marion Zimmer Bradley*. She had every *Conan the Barbarian* story (by *Robert Howard*) that existed. She said “Howard has an excellent technique with action – unfortunately he tends to repeat himself in plotlines – but he can invoke very eerie backgrounds.”

In 1998 that list had expanded to include, among others, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Alan Gardner, Susan Cooper, David Mason, C.J. Cherryh, Cordwain Smith, J.R.R. Tolkien, Roger Zelazny, L. Sprague de Camp and Anne McCaffrey.

Claudiu Antal: How did she start on such a prolific career?

Jay Watts: In High School she work on the school newspaper *The Collinwood Spotlight* as literary editor, she joined a special class with a teacher named *Miss Sylvia Cockran* (an adviser to paper), they would meet on their own time and write whatever they wanted. Out of twelve students five members of that class have gone on to become professional writers.

She wrote *Ralestone Luck* (1938, her second to be published) while in High School. Her first book *The Prince Commands* (1934) was published before she was 21.

She was a librarian for the Cleveland Public Library System for almost 20 years working in children’s literature and wrote in her spare time. In the 50s she became a full time writer and the rest is history.

Nettie Seebohm/ Adam J. Meek: Did she find writing under a male pen name helpful in making her career a success?

Jay Watts: Yes, absolutely – she started writing under Andre’ because she was writing adventure novels for young boys. In the late 30s and early 40s no boy wanted to read a story written by a girl. In 1934 she had her name legally changed. Many times she had stated that she preferred Andre’ over her given name of Alice Mary.

In the 1950s she was working for Gnome Press as an editor and her boss Martin Greenberg asked her not to use her real name when releasing books. So she chose Andrew North because of how close it was to her name.

John Grayshaw: How many of her readers knew she was a woman? Was it a secret like Tiptree?

Jay Watts: That’s a really tough question, some seem to have known from the beginning and some still seemed surprised today. For me it never mattered, I never based a story on who or what wrote it. I have always judged a story by its content. As for it being secret – No, I don’t believe Andre or her publishers ever kept it a secret, but they certainly never advertised it.

Molly Greenspring: What kind of research did she do for her books?

Jay Watts: She researched things extensively, for example for *Witch World* (1963) she dove deep into Celtic and old English lore. She would read up to 20 different books to research for one. I know for a fact that she would read many different subjects to get things right. In interview after interview she talked about the efforts she would undergo to prepare for creating a story. Please do not ask me to cite example(s) for I could fill pages. All the material needed to prove my statement can be found at my

website on pages like <http://andre-norton-books.com/andre-s-life/interviews-with-andre> and <http://andre-norton-books.com/andre-s-life/interviews-with-andre/174-video-interviews>

John Grayshaw: How did you first become an Andre Norton fan?

Jay Watts: I was 9 years old and discovered a copy of *Daybreak 2250 A.D.* (1952 aka: *Star Man's Son*) at my local drug store. It was about an outcast who had a telepathic connection with his big cat, got to explore ruined cities, battle giant rats and save his people from war. After reading *The Beast Master* (1959) & *Lord of Thunder* (1962) then *Sargasso of Space* (1955) & *Plague Ship* (1956) I was hooked and went on a quest to find anything else by this author and many others. Note: I still have that copy of *Daybreak 2250 A.D.*

John Grayshaw: How did you come to collect and study her work?

Jay Watts: Well, I have always kept books that I really liked, mostly so I could reread it but also so I could show it to people and say "You really have to read this!" By the time I was 30 I had at least 25 of Andre's book. (All were paperback, I could never afford hardback books.) Then I spent an afternoon with Andre and left with another dozen + books. I'm a completist with OCD – I now have over 1200 paperbacks (collecting all the different covers) and about 200 hard-covers. The studying came about by trying to identify Andre's work for my collection.

John Grayshaw: What made you start the Andre-Norton-Books.com website?

Jay Watts: That was kind of a family challenge. I had been collecting data on the Works of Andre for my book collection, in order to identify what I was looking for. All my research was on paper and had become quite unwieldy. In 1995 we got our first home computer. I have always had a love of compiling and organizing data, and so I endeavored to put all my data on the computer in a Word document of all things. As the internet expanded I grew dismayed and aggravated at how many sites about books and even about Andre were so full of errors. In 2002 my family members kept telling me that I should put all my data about Andre's work in a book. I had no idea of how to go about that. In 2004 Andre-Norton-Books.com was born as a way to correct all the bad info that was on the internet (including the now defunct AndreNorton.org site). It started as my word document posted on a free hosting site. I discovered I could add images and documents (if I paid for hosting). My website has grown substantially from its humble beginnings, for I have added all my research and a large quantity of work by others. The site is on its sixth revision. The page for each title list write-ups (synopsis) both professional and by fans, reviews, the publishing information for all the editions I have identified (including foreign editions) and of course the cover-art for those editions. Now the site has over 1200 pages, a couple hundred PDF's, 6+ hours of video and over 7000 images. It is now an International site (viewed by people all over the world) with an average of 175 visitors a day.

John Grayshaw: Did you know Andre Norton personally?

Jay Watts: No, although I did meet with her in 1992 and spent a little over 4 hours in her living room drinking tea, petting her many cats and discussing how I could become a writer amongst other topics. (Becoming a writer never happened.)

John Grayshaw: How did you come to be a representative of her estate?

Jay Watts: In 2010 the Estate of Andre Norton was looking into creating a collection of short stories by Andre. However they had a minor problem – their records were incomplete (for reasons I will not go into). They started asking around in the world of Andre fans who would be the best person to help with this. Several collectors told the Estate that they should contact me to see if I could help. And so they found my site, as it turns out I was the only person who had ever compiled the info they needed. I volunteered to scan and share with them my entire short story collection. In 2012 I was offered the honor of becoming the official website of the Estate of Andre Norton. It should be noted that I maintain complete control of the site but I do work closely with them on various projects. Oh, and that collection became a 3 volume set known as *Tales from High Hallack: The Collected Short Stories of Andre Norton* – Edited by *Jean Rabe*.

John Grayshaw: Did Andre Norton go to conventions and meet her fans?

Jay Watts: She went to a few. However she suffered from several maladies that kept her at home. For example in the 50s and 60s she had a persistent inner ear infection that gave her vertigo so she stayed in her home in Ohio and wrote. As she grew older she just didn't like to travel. In the late 80s and early 90s she did make it to several conventions. Two of which are covered on my site as video of her panel discussions. And two others are documented in photos, shown in the photo galleries. <http://andre-norton-books.com/andre-s-life/galleries>

John Grayshaw: Who are some science fiction writers she had correspondence and friendships with?

Jay Watts: There are way too many to list here. Since she didn't travel well, she had ongoing correspondence with a very large group of people. Most of said correspondence is archived in the Syracuse University Library. Andre wrote back and forth with both fans and co-authors, and she was known to say that "Authors had a duty to return a thank you note to fans" she added that "The fan didn't have to buy your book, so you owe a 'Thank You' at the very least."

John Grayshaw: Did female writers of the time correspond and support each other at all?

Jay Watts: According to Andre the answer to that would be a big YES. Many female authors attribute Andre as their inspiration. If you need proof of that, just look at the "Tribute to Andre" on my site. It is full of tributes by people who tell their story and they start by telling how they wrote Andre about wanting to write, and the encouragement they got from her. <http://andre-norton-books.com/andre-s-life/tribute>

John Grayshaw: Norton wrote science fiction and fantasy and sometimes in-between. Was there less of a division between the two? Or was she always conscious of "switching gears?"

Jay Watts: I would say yes to the first question, at least in the circles for which Andre and her work existed. My old-timers is catching up with me as I can't seem to find a quote I remember, so I cannot cite who said it. But it went like this "If science fiction is red and fantasy is blue then Andre's work is purple." Andre never "switched gears" she just wrote what she wanted at that time.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Norton?

Jay Watts: Well, the first would be that she claimed she was never a short story writer, but she has written almost a hundred of them. Most are amazing considering she claims she doesn't like writing

short stories. They vary in genres more than her novels. I'm not a big fan of shorts, but I've read hers and I like all of them. --- I have just recently started showcasing them on my website in what is called "Andre's Reading Corner". Twice a month I post, at random, one of Andre's short stories in its entirety. Along with the publishing information so the reader can obtain their own copy. <http://andre-norton-books.com/andre-s-reading-corner>

The second would be how much Andre and I are alike. For example; I found out that Andre had a big tree as a friend. At her Tennessee home she had a big Oak in her side yard and she could very often be found out there talking to her friend "Mr. Tree". I too have a big Oak in my back yard that I often talk to, for he will listen to me all day if needed. I could go on-and-on with the similarities but I won't bore you with such details. A picture of Andre's friend can be found here. <http://andre-norton-books.com/andre-s-life/galleries/193-tennessee-image-gallery#gallerydff3b937ad-44>

John Grayshaw: Was there anything in your research of Norton that surprised you?

Jay Watts: I very surprised to discover that at least 5 people did their collage thesis on Andre and even more surprising to me, they allowed me to post them on my site. I choose to make you go look for them on my site. Just put thesis in the search bar. This way you might also find other articles that may interest you.

John Grayshaw: What are the funniest things you've found in your research of Norton?

Jay Watts: I guess that would have to be the fact that Andre had a large collection of Victorian porn. Yes I said Victorian porn. She would often pull out her collection at "Tea parties" she would have at her house. All the ladies would shyly pass it all around and have a little giggle fest.

John Grayshaw: How did she decide to write sequels? Did she always just write the stories she wanted or did her publisher sometimes ask her to write certain things based on sales/fan reaction?

Jay Watts: As it turns out only two of her 26 series started as series. That would be *The Solar Queen* and *The Time Trader* series. Even her much loved *Witch World* was supposed to be a single novel. But, in her words she "Got so many fans asking for details about what happened next" that the series grew to 22 novels by her and a dozen more by collaborators. For the most part her publishers let her write what she wanted, because they always sold.

John DeLaughter: Are any of her novels under option for movies?

Jay Watts: That's a big YES – unfortunately Hollywood is so flakey and weird that I am not at liberty to say what they are. I know of several. And if they (hollyweird) do as they have promised and stick to the book they will be great. There was one (a dozen or so years back) that was underway and I was sent info on it. I posted said info (with permission from the sender) on the site and all hell broke loose, the project was canceled.

John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished Norton works in drawers or archives somewhere or is everything published?

Jay Watts: YES – but I cannot and will not say who has them. I have made a personal promise to keep it quiet.

And another shameless plug to my website – Over the past few years I have managed to get my hands on a large quantity of unpublished works by Andre and have been allowed to publish many on my site. I'm working on getting more. I have 2 manuscripts that for the longest time were considered lost. Well, they're not lost, I have them (yes - the originals) and obtained permission from the Estate to post them in their entirety on my site. One is the fourth novel in the *Sword* series titled *Trouble in Myapan*. The other was considered the "holy grail" of collecting, titled *The Scribbling Women*. It's a text book that Andre wrote in the 50s about Women Writers in the Victorian Era. For at least 40 years the manuscript was thought to be lost forever except for some excerpts in a magazine called *The Book Mart* (1981 & 2). There are many other previously unpublished works available for your reading pleasure at, <http://andre-norton-books.com/unpublished-works>

John Grayshaw: She was so prolific, how many pages did she write in a day? And how quickly could she write a book? And did she have particular writing habits or routines she stuck with?

Jay Watts: She would write every day – health permitting. Once she was a full time writer her goal was a chapter a day. Say eight to ten pages of typed text. She rose early each morning, answered her fan mail and about 7:30am she would start her writing. She would go for 3 to 4 hours until she reach her daily goal. She liked to turn in around 7pm with a good book and read till she fell asleep.

In the 40s because she had a day job she managed a book a year. In the 50s it went to 2 or 3 a year, in the 60s she kicked out 4 a year, in the 70s, 80s and 90s with the help of collaborators it could be as high as 7 a year.

John Grayshaw: What were some of her hobbies other than writing?

Jay Watts: Let's see – she liked beading and bead collecting. She made jewelry and sold it on Ebay. She collected anything about cats and had a very large collection of cat figurines and real cats (go figure)(she had five cats when I visited her and at other times as many as 9). She was a scrap-booker, of which I have 15 of them scanned on my site. Though, all of them are about her work. <http://andre-norton-books.com/book-of-shadows>

And of course she was a prolific reader.

John Grayshaw: What is Andre Norton's legacy? Why was her work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

Jay Watts: This is probably the toughest question on your list, for I am not a scholar of any kind. To me her legacy is her body of work. Many professional authors look at a list of her work and are in total awe. Most of the people that have read her work become collectors, and most are white-collar workers. I know that I became an Electro-Mechanical Engineering Technician at NASA in large part because of reading her space adventure in my teenage years. Over the years I have read hundreds of testimonials stating similar stories. The amount of writers who got into the business because of Andre's encouragement is mind-blowing. And now with the advent of E-books the Estate has been able to release many of Andre's titles to a new generation of readers. My only concern is the recent occurrence of some overly sensitive reviewers who have been known to trash Andre's books because they don't address all the social inequalities of today. Andre herself often said "that a writer should write so that the reader can escape all the troubles of their day". And I totally agree.

John – this has been fun. Thanks for contacting me and allowing me to further spread the word on “The Grande Dame of Science Fiction and Fantasy”.

Jay Watts – Webmaster of <http://Andre-Norton-Books.com>