

# All Cats Are Gray Short Guide

## All Cats Are Gray by Andre Norton

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## Overview

There are three mysteries to be solved in "All Cats Are Gray." The first is the mystery of Steena's personality. She is silent most of the time, but when she speaks others listen carefully. She has identified great riches for those who would have them, yet has avoided taking advantage of her own knowledge of where fortunes are made; she has even turned down offers of rewards from the grateful people her ideas have helped to make rich. The secret of her personality only reveals itself during her adventure on the spaceship Empress of Mars.

The second mystery is that of her cat, Bat, the only gift she has ever accepted. It behaves in a decorous fashion, draping itself around Steena's shoulders when she moves about, and sitting calmly on tavern tables when Steena chooses to sit. The third mystery is that of the derelict spaceship Empress of Mars, a luxury liner that has long followed a bizarre orbit around the sun, its crew and passengers having disappeared without a trace. Those who have tried to salvage the spaceship have either disappeared themselves or returned to civilization closed-mouthed, refusing to tell any one about what they experienced. "All Cats Are Gray" is a good adventure, with a twist in characterization that raises it above ordinary fare.

## About the Author

Andre Norton was born Alice Mary Norton in Cleveland, Ohio, on February 17, 1912. It appears that she wanted to be a writer from an early age and worked on her writing through high school. Her first published book was *The Prince Commands* (1934), an historical novel. She published primarily historical fiction until the 1950s, and she worked as a librarian in Cleveland from 1930-1941, at the Library of Congress in 1940, and again in Cleveland from 1941— 1951. However, agoraphobia, a fear of being helpless in embarrassing situations characterized by the avoidance of public places, made it difficult for Norton to continue working as a librarian, and she became an editor for Gnome Press from 1950-1958.

From then to the 1980s, when an effective treatment was found for her agoraphobia, she traveled little and focused on her writing, producing about three books a year.

Although interested in science fiction, she had written little in this genre before the 1950s because she preferred to write novels rather than short stories, and the market for science fiction prior to World War II had been primarily pulp magazines. The demand for science fiction novels expanded markedly after World War II with the success of such writers as Robert Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, and Isaac Asimov who proved that a large audience for their novel-length works existed. When Norton tried her hand at a science fiction novel, her publishers feared that her female name might deter people from buying her works in a field dominated by male authors. Ironically, Norton's science fiction novels have sold millions of copies, and her audience is aware of the fact that she is a female writer using a male pseudonym. In the early 1950s however, publishers believed that the audience for science fiction was comprised of adolescent males who would prefer works written by men. Thus historical author Alice Mary Norton assumed the pseudonym Andre Norton for her science fiction works.

*Star Man's Son, 2250 A.D.*, her first science fiction novel, was published in 1952; it remains in print and has sold over a million copies. Norton's adventure tales of young men and women surviving against all odds on strange worlds and in imaginative future societies won her a large following among young people in the 1950s and 1960s who continued to read her works when they were adults. Few authors have as passionate and affectionate a following as Norton. Even as her personal world seemed to close her away from her fans during the 1970s, Norton's fiction soared among them.

Arthritis had become a significant problem for the author, but with new treatments in the 1980s, Norton was able to sometimes leave home and visit a science fiction or a fantasy convention. In the later 1980s, she increasingly collaborated with younger authors, but she returned to publishing a number of books on her own in the 1990s. Although she may have initially been shy about writing short stories, writing science fiction seems to have inspired in her a number of short gems such as "All Cats Are Gray."

## Setting

The events of "All Cats Are Gray" take place in a future when human beings have mastered interplanetary travel. The society seems to be a complex one, although the action focuses primarily on freighter captains and their lives, which are devoted to making enough money to stay ahead of their creditors. Steena does not speak much, so there is no telling whether she suffers the same financial embarrassments as her peers, but her steady, almost stoic demeanor is well suited to a life among asteroids and taverns, with little company besides her cat.



## Social Sensitivity

In the workaday world of Steena, men and women seem to mingle as equals. There is no suggestion that her status as a free spacer is at all unusual for a woman. Indeed, she seems to naturally belong with the tough, hard living space farers, and she seems to be accepted as a matter of course.

The ending of "All Cats Are Gray" has a slight "she found her man" aspect to it, but it is primarily representative of Steena's breaking out of her self-imposed loneliness.

It shows that she has learned to accept herself as she is, symbolized by the colorful baubles that she wears when she is out with her husband and Bat. Before, she retreated into gray places and into the grayness of herself. Her adventure on the Empress of Mars, in which she put her disability to good use, seems to have opened her to mingle among a colorful world without being self-conscious.



## Literary Qualities

The narrator of "All Cats Are Gray" affects a tough-guy tone: For I was there, right in the Rigel Royal, when it all began on the night that Cliff Moran blew in, looking lower than an antman's belly and twice as nasty. He'd had a spell of luck foul enough to twist a man into a slug snake, and we all knew that there was an attachment out for his ship. Cliff had fought his way up from the back courts of Venaport. Lose his ship and he'd slip back there—to rot. He was at the snarling stage that night when he picked out a table for himself and set out to drink away his troubles.

This style seems exactly right for a tale of two hard-bitten people making some good luck for themselves while overcoming a terrible danger. The style is also humorous, reminding us that the tale is for entertainment. The strained metaphors are particularly amusing, with phrases such as "lower than an antman's belly and twice as nasty" adding to the fun of the story.



## Themes and Characters

"All Cats Are Gray" is narrated in the first person. The narrator is only distantly acquainted with Steena—"Steena of the Spaceways" he calls her—having seen her only in "stellar-port dive[s] frequented by free spacers." It appears that the narrator is an author who has written a work titled "Stellar-Vedo spreads". S/he affects a tough-guy image and implies that s/he has written second-rate thrillers. The narrative style is honest, making distinctions between the events witnessed directly by the narrator and the ones that have been reconstructed from accounts told by free spacers.

According to the narrator, Steena "was as colorless as a lunar planet—even the hair netted down to her skull had a sort of grayish cast, and I never saw her but once draped in anything but a shapeless and baggy gray spaceall." This description is a foreshadowing intended to make Steena an interesting eccentric. Throughout "All Cats Are Gray," similar hints of future events are cleverly blended into seemingly innocent descriptions.

Steena is typical of Norton's other heroines: self-reliant, tough, and smart. Even so, she has interesting distinguishing traits. For instance, she rarely talks, preferring to listen while sitting in a grayish background.

Yet she is not just a part of the background of the lives of other free spacers, making remarkable, seemingly off-the-wall assertions of fortunes to be made, "and the lucky few who heard her rare spoken words— these will never forget Steena." She is listened to because of "her queer store of knowledge and her photographic memory."

Steena refuses all rewards or gifts from those whose fortunes she helps make, apparently preferring to live her lonely life in the background of the action around her. It is Bub Nelson, who made his fortune based on a tip from Steena, who finally finds a gift she will accept: a "big gray tomcat" that she names Bat. Her acceptance of the cat is a clue as to why she prefers to be an observer and offers a hint about her personality. Bat is quite a character in his own right. According to the narrator, he would drape himself "over the shoulders of the thin gray woman, would make himself at home on any table Steena placed him on," and "He developed a liking for Vernal juice, drank it neat and quick, right out of the glass." Bat is also an important participant in the solving of the mystery of the Empress of Mars.

The other important character in "All Cats Are Gray" is Cliff Moran, a down-on-his-luck captain about to lose his spaceship to receivership. He is just the sort of person Steena would help, and is desperate enough to charge off to the Empress of Mars when Steena says that its orbit has brought it nearby. Moran is smart, picking up quickly on Steena's behavior in the control room of the Empress of Mars as she confronts the being who has murdered those who have ventured into the ship. He is also undisturbed by Steena's disability—"Steena had found someone who knew of her gray world and did not find it too hard to share with her—someone besides Bat. It turned out to be a real





love match"—making him the sort of sensitive, although tough, hero typical of much of Norton's fiction.

The theme of "All Cats Are Gray" is tricky and it is tied to Steena's disability. In science fiction, especially science fiction for young adults, main characters are often poor and powerless people who overcome dangers by using a special ability that sets them apart from most people. These protagonists are wish-fulfillment figures, people who act out an audience's desire for the power to take charge of life and overcome society's real-life power over them. "All Cats Are Gray" adds a twist to this wish fulfillment figure by giving her a disability rather than some extraordinary power. Hinted at from the very beginning of the story, it is revealed later that Steena is color-blind, seeing life only in shades of gray. Her gray clothing, her preference for gray areas of taverns, all reflect her inability to appreciate colors and her comfort in environments where she can see contrasting shades of gray.

"What sped before them was invisible to her, but Bat was never baffled by it," says the narrator as Steena follows Bat and something else to the control room where Cliff Moran is trying to bring the Empress of Mars back to life. The cat can see something that human beings cannot normally see, something that is out of the range of normal color vision. Steena, too, can sometimes see the mysterious being that inhabits the derelict spaceship because she can contrast it against the shades of gray she normally sees. Thus, what had been a disability becomes a critical weapon against the malevolent creature that had murdered many people before she came on board. This clever twist on an old stereotype adds depth both to Steena and to the narrative, which has been, in retrospect, an account of Steena's efforts to cope— sometimes unsuccessfully—with her colorblindness.



## Topics for Discussion

1. If something were a color that people could not see, would that make it black?
2. Why does Steena stay in the background of the places she visits? Why does she not join in the conversations and activity of the taverns?
3. What does the title "All Cats Are Gray" mean? For whom are all cats gray?
4. What about Bat makes him acceptable company to Steena?
5. Steena has avoided capitalizing on her knowledge of riches to be made until the Empress of Mars adventure. Why does she vary from her usual pattern in this particular case?
6. What makes Cliff Moran a good husband for Steena?
7. Why is Bat valuable to have on board the Empress of Mars?
8. What is meant by "happy marriages need no chronicles"?
9. What point is being made when Steena is shown wearing a "flame-red cloak" and "rubies blazing on her wrists"?
10. Why would Norton turn Steena's seeming disadvantage, her colorblindness, into an asset? What is the point?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Scientific research more recent than when "All Cats Are Gray" was originally published (1971) suggests that domestic cats do in fact see colors. Briefly summarize this research. What colors do cats see? How have scientists figured out what colors cats can see?

2. If something was a color that people cannot see, what does science say people would see when they looked at it?

3. What is color blindness? What forms does it take? What causes it?

4. What is electromagnetic radiation? What part of it can human beings see? What parts can be seen by animals but not people?

5. Are there ways to sense electromagnetic radiation without actually "seeing" it?

What are these ways?

6. Has Norton written any other stories about cats? What do they have in common with "All Cats Are Gray"?

7. There must be other crazy stories to be found in the "dives" the narrator of "All Cats Are Gray" is familiar with.

Imitate his style, pretending he is telling another story about someone he has seen among the free spacers.

8. Has Norton invented any other heroines like Steena? Who would they be?

Are their adventures like that of the Empress of Mars?

9. Would Steena stop giving free advice now that she is married and rich, or would she continue to do so? Why or why not? If yes, then invent a story of an adventure she inspires.



## For Further Reference

Clute, John and Peter Nicholls. "Norton, Andre." In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995, pp. 877-878. Summarizes Norton's career and identifies key publications in her development as a writer.

Jones, J. Sydney. "Norton, Andre." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 91. Edited by Alan Hedblad. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997, pp. 148-156. This article includes an extensive bibliography of Norton's publications plus several pages summarizing her career, focusing mostly on her recent works.

Platt, Charles. "Andre Norton." In *his Dream Makers: Volume II*. New York: Berkley Books, 1983, pp. 95-102. This interview provides a snapshot of Norton in the late 1960s or early 1970s. And yes, she has a cat she introduces to Platt. It is Ty, an Abyssinian who, Norton points out, is unusually reddish, Abyssinians usually being gray.

Schlobin, Roger C. *Andre Norton: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980. By 1980, Norton had been publishing for almost fifty years.

This book covers what was by then an enormous corpus of works by and about Norton.

## Related Titles

Like Steena, most of Norton's protagonists are loners, who for one reason or another are out of sync with society. For instance, Troy Horan in *Catseye* (please see separate entry) is already somewhat alienated from his society when the novel starts because he is chronically in search of employment. When he discovers that he can psychically communicate with animals, his alienation becomes more pronounced because the animals are being abused by their owners. Like Steena, he does not waver from his determination to see his adventure through when he tries to help the animals.

Cats are of particular interest to Norton.

One of her hobbies is the collecting of cat figurines. She has co-edited a series of anthologies (*Catfantastic*, presently four volumes) in which the adventures of cats—usually amazing—are center stage.



# Copyright Information

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