

# Key Out of Time Short Guide

## Key Out of Time by Andre Norton

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## Overview

Key Out of Time is the final book in a series that began with *The Time Traders* and continued with *Galactic Derelict* and *The Defiant Agents*. Ross Murdock, the hero of *Key Out of Time*, is a character with whom most young adult readers will sympathize. As a teen-ager, Ross got into trouble with the law, and often felt that he did not fit in with others. Just when he has found a satisfying career with the Time Agents and a close friend in the person of his older partner, Gordon Ashe, Ross is stranded in time.

Adapting to change is a major challenge in people's lives; the manner in which Ross accepts responsibilities in his new world helps readers understand the rewards of doing so themselves.

## About the Author

Born on February 17, 1912, in Cleveland, Ohio, Alice Mary Norton began writing as a teen-ager. By age twenty-one she had published her first book, *The Prince Commands* (1934), a historical novel for adults. After attending Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Norton became a children's librarian in the city's public library, a job she held from 1932 to 1950. She then accepted a job with the Library of Congress, and continued to write in her spare time, but by mid-decade the increasing popularity of her books convinced her to devote all of her time to writing.

Norton's publishers warned her that readers would be reluctant to purchase adventure tales—traditionally focused on male protagonists, and targeted at a male audience—authored by an "Alice Mary." Norton adopted the pseudonym of "Andre Norton" for her works of fantasy and historical adventure; she began writing science fiction in 1947 as "Andrew North," but soon abandoned this pen name in favor of the other.

Although Norton has written fourteen historical novels and eight books of legends and magic for children, she is best known for her science fiction and fantasy novels. She has written two or three books a year since becoming a full-time writer, and has published more than one hundred books over the course of her career. Although she has not achieved the critical recognition of other authors, Norton was honored by the World Fantasy Convention in 1987 for lifetime achievement. When *Lotus* magazine conducted a poll in 1987 asking readers to identify the best fantasy writers of all time, Norton tied for twenty-third place.

Norton has suffered from ill health since the 1950s, and spent many years as an invalid. She currently lives in Florida and, as a result of new medication, is able to travel to science fiction conventions occasionally.



# Characters

Ross Murdock is an ex-criminal who was rescued by Gordon Ashe and made into a useful member of the Time Agents—a man who values his freedom above all, and relies on his own strength and cunning. While his refusal to accept magic and supernatural forces prevents him from becoming part of an ancient world of nature, his personal integrity also enables him later on to resist the cruel mind-altering forces of the evil invading alien race of Baldies, voyagers from another universe bent on subjugating Hawaika.

Power corrupts and weakens, not only the power of modern technology which is represented by the Baldies. Having had an earlier encounter with them (*Time Traders*, 1958), Ross also understands them and is the only one able to effectively fight them. The Foanna have been weakened by centuries of no change; they need the strength and common sense of Ross. The stubborn individualist who refuses to give up his identity cannot be swallowed up by any force, beneficial or otherwise, but can bring new vitality to an age-old battle. Yet such individualism has a price, the price of never quite belonging, of always being the lonely outsider.

Norton's literary heroes are "looking in", never quite part of a society, but also having the advantage of an unbiased viewpoint. Ross is brave and intelligent, but he is chiefly a man of action, and lacks imagination. He is the man who claws his way up, the loner who overcomes all obstacles, the social misfit and outcast, a favorite type of protagonist that Norton employs in many of her novels. Because he had always depended only upon himself, he has trouble associating with others, especially the relaxed Polynesians, as well as the strong, selfpossessed woman Karana. His chief loyalty lies with the other agent, to whom he is tied by friendship as well as gratefulness, since Ashe saved him and gave him a new start in life. Yet he also has strong moral fiber, somewhat unexpected in a man of his background, and always comes readily to the assistance of the oppressed, whether they are part of his own team or inhabitants of another world. He has a fear of entrapment which is similar to that of a wild animal. Like the fox in a snare that chews off its own leg to escape, Ross still bears scars from an earlier encounter with the aliens where he deliberately used pain as a means to keep his mind from their control.

As in many of her novels, Norton develops a central character and groups the secondary characters by nationality, race, or descent, giving them little individuality as rounded personalities. The Foanna are revealed as three women, but they remain nebulous in their loose grey cloaks and misty shapes even though they are flesh and blood, much to Ross's relief.

The Rovers, rough, Viking-like seafarers, are led by Torgul, their captain, but he is no different from the others except for his leadership position, which causes him to be more prudent and less impulsive.



The Baldies can best be characterized by their total lack of individuality. They are dressed identically, look alike, and act like robots. Their mental powers have given them grotesquely large heads, but their physical attributes have dwindled, and they are weak and spindly looking. The remaining Terrans, Ross's group of explorers, consist of Karara, the two dolphins, and Ashe. Karara is a beautiful, intelligent, and sensitive young woman of Polynesian chieftain lines, who stands for the unspoiled human in harmony with nature. She is able to communicate with the dolphins by mental telepathy, a skill which Ross resents because he cannot explain it. He also sees her as a female intruding in the male companionship between himself and agent Ashe, and he treats her with undeserved harshness.

She, however, is unfailingly courteous.

Being at home with ancient beliefs and magic, she easily communes with and trusts the Foanna, and she is accepted by them.

The last of the human Terrans is Gordon Ashe, friend and fellow agent of Ross. Unlike his colleague, Ashe has no problem with accepting and becoming part of the power of the Old Ones. He lacks the fierce independence and individuality of Ross and occupies a middle position between the ordinary and the magical.



# Setting

Earlier books in the Ross Murdock series, and occasional references in *Key Out of Time*, reveal that, during the late twentieth century, both the Soviet Union and the United States develop technology making time travel possible.

The two nations compete with each other to explore past civilizations. Aided by tapes belonging to an ancient stellar empire, scientists on Earth make great strides in the field of space travel.

American Time Agents Ross Murdock and Gordon Ashe belong to the first generation of space-and-time explorers; they are driven by a quest for knowledge and a desire to keep ahead of the Soviets.

As the leaders of a group of Samoan and Hawaiian volunteers, Ross and Gordon plan to settle on Hawaika, an island world mentioned in the ancient alien tapes. At first Hawaika seems "a rose world bathed in soft sunlight, knowing only gentle winds." Although the ancient tapes noted that a civilization once existed on Hawaika, no traces of it remain.

When, however, Ross is transported through a Time Gate some ten thousand years into the past, he discovers—and must learn to live among—the original inhabitants of Hawaika.



## Social Concerns

Technology as the villain in modern life is a point of view that is quite popular in the twentieth century. Progress that was hailed in the nineteenth century has given way to a nostalgic longing for simpler, more "natural" ways of life before machines became integral to our lives. By her own admission, Andre Norton is against technology: "Yes, I am anti-machine. The more research I do, the more I am convinced that when western civilization turned to machines so heartily with the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth century, they threw away some parts of life which are now missing and which the lack of leads to much of our present frustration." Modern man has lost the way back to being a part of nature and creation. In *Key Out of Time*, a group of scientists from Terra (Earth) are visiting a small planet that could be a place for a happier, more natural life than exists on Earth. According to ancient maps and information, the planet may also be a suitable location to set up a time portal that will allow researchers to travel back in time and study its past. Aptly named Hawaika after an ancient Hawaiian paradise, this world consists of a system of islands and lagoons and appears to be truly a natural Eden, but an Eden devoid of intelligent life, eternally peaceful in the bright sunshine and idyllic beaches.

The crew, consisting of Polynesians, is quite content to relax, fish and play in the waters, but Ross Murdock, trained Time Agent and one of the expedition leaders, feels angry and frustrated. Ancient maps and tapes show a flourishing past civilization, but not a trace of humans or even advanced animals can be found. Ross is disappointed by the lack of remnants of the past culture, because they will be needed to successfully construct the time gate. He also resents the easy, intuitive knowledge that allows Karara, a Polynesian female scientist, to communicate with the expedition's two dolphins. Ross lacks this telepathic faculty, and the only skills he has are his strength and fighting ability. He mistrusts any other powers.

The contrast between the "natural" powers of the mind, which help the Polynesians to be at one with animals and nature, and the brute physical force of the body that seeks dominion over them, are lost to modern Western civilized man.

Ross also seems to have difficulties working with the Polynesian girl, although she is as capable and well trained as he is.

Having lived in the masculine world of Time Agents, he disdains and is angered by the young woman.

Finally, strange cylinders are discovered on the sea floor, obviously traces of an early habitation, and a time gate is constructed. But then, nature asserts herself, and a typhoon sweeps Ross, his companion Ashe, Karana, and the two dolphins through the partially constructed gate, destroying it in the process, and closing the door to any return to their own time.





Survival becomes the first order of the day as Ross battles the fierce waves caused by the storm. Ross has to learn to overcome his reluctance to cooperate with Karana. To succeed, they have to rely on each other. This cautious, almost inimical relationship between the main male character and his female counterpart appears repeatedly in Norton's novels.

On the surface, it is sometimes disguised as a contest for power. Karana, like Ross, is a scientist, yet she also possesses the almost supernatural ability to be one with her environment, such as controlling the dolphins. This seems to annoy Ross, who is not able to do the same. Yet on a deeper level, Ross seems almost to be afraid of her. Strongly resenting anything that smacks of magic, he has yet to learn that he, too, possesses such powers, and only when he finally admits to them. Does the relationship them cease to be one of distrust between male and female, and become simply one between human beings who need and rely on each other?

## Social Sensitivity

Norton creates a rarity in *Key Out of Time*, fashioning an adventure story that does not pit good against evil. She clearly depicts Ross's weaknesses—his anger when he has to listen to Karara, and his desire for violence when frustrated. The errors of the government-run Project (under which the Time Agents operate) are also mentioned. The Baldies are physically unpleasant and mentally frightening, but Norton does not present them as stock villains, choosing instead to emphasize their steadfast pursuit of certain goals.

Karara is a strong woman character; her strength lies in her sensitivity and willingness to commune with alien minds. When *Key Out of Time* was published in 1963 there were very few strong women in science fiction, and Norton was actually criticized by some readers for focusing *Year of the Unicorn* on a strong woman character. Despite Norton's relatively strong characterization of Karara, *Key Out of Time* lacks a true feminine viewpoint. Norton mentions "men and girls" rather than "men and women"; she depicts Loketh's anger at the accusation that he is "fit only to do women's tasks" without commenting on the bias implicit in the phrase. Finally, the Foanna, although extremely powerful, seem eager to conceal the fact that they are female.

## Techniques

Norton is first and foremost a storyteller. She describes herself as "a very staid teller of old fashioned stories." The plot and its exciting situations take precedence over underlying ideas or messages.

Like her unpretentious hero Ross, she prefers action over contemplation. The narrative pattern is one of alternating conflicts and escapes, taking the hero from one exciting predicament to the next. Yet the ending, as in most Norton's novels, is shadowy and inconclusive, allowing for continuations. Will the Baldies return to destroy the Hawaikan civilization once again, leaving the beautiful but soulless planet of the beginning? Or has the interference of the Terran team in the affairs of the planet changed the course of history? The answer is not given except for a general impression of hope: "Grasp tight the present. Ross looked about him. Yes the present might be very satisfying after all."

Part of the attractiveness of Norton's novels are the colorful, alien worlds that her characters encounter. Yet details are rarely given, and the action predominates.

The most descriptive passage in the *Key Out of Time* is the opening paragraph: "A rose world bathed in soft sunlight, knowing only gentle winds, peace—and sloth."

With a few deft strokes, Norton gives the reader the feeling of seeing a world of color, yet actually it consists only of quick, fleeting impressions, skillfully stimulating the imagination.



# Themes

The instinct for freedom and for the preservation of the integrity of the individual is a major theme in this novel.

After Ross has been swept by a storm through a time gate into the ancient past of Hawaika, he must constantly evade powers that try to enslave or absorb him.

Barely escaping drowning, he enters an imposing fortress which belongs to a powerful and mysterious group, the Foanna. Local superstition regards them as gods, but Ross considers this nonsense. His desperate need for survival allows him to break into the castle which is supposed to be protected by undefined mental barriers. He is able to pass them only because he does not believe in them.

His stubborn refusal to fall under the spell of the Foanna and to believe that they are alien gods who can protect or curse keeps him from giving in to their power. Karana, closer to her ancient culture, finds it easier to accept and to give in, even when Ross escapes. The same courageous or desperate reliance on his physical prowess saves him when he is captured by the Rovers, a Viking-like people who cruise the seas for plunder.

Impressed by Ross's fighting ability, they vow to help him, but are frightened by the magic of the Foanna. Ross's refusal to admit the natural and magic powers of Karana, and later of the Foanna, may lead to the conclusion that he simply represents the modern scientist whose technological orientation is superior to that of more primitive and superstitious races.

However, the young researcher does not really use his modern knowledge and training. Instead, he fights against his uneasy dread of unknown magic by simply drawing on his strength of body and mind. He tries to convince himself that magic does not exist, but is frightened when he senses that he himself might also possess similar natural abilities.

There is another aspect to the theme of individual capability and strength.

Ross, in spite of his independence, suffers from a feeling of loneliness. A social misfit in his own world, and a stranger in the alien world of Hawaika, he does not seem to belong anywhere, and is unable to release control and become part of something else. Karana, the natural woman, finds an easy acceptance by the Foanna, and even his fellow agent Ashe can accept their power and become one with them, but Ross stubbornly refuses.

"Ross knew he must attempt this independent action, that in order to remain the Ross Murdock he had always been, he must be an actor, not a spectator." Only in the moments of highest danger does he finally accept the ancient powers, and sings the song of the Foanna: "'Ye forty thousand gods, ye gods of sea, of sky - of stars', he improvised, . . ." Paying a tribute to the ancient powers, he was coming close to understanding them.



The leading power on Hawaika is an ancient race, the Foanna, who are known to have frightening powers, and who are widely feared. Old beyond memory, they have never changed, and this lack of change is now the cause of their weakening and dying out. They are able to control the local population, but when a new, alien civilization arrives from outer space, a civilization with a highly developed technology used to subjugate other worlds, the conflict between two types of powers becomes critical. Who will prevail? Only with the help of the Terrans can the Foanna win. All power weakens, even if it is a natural magic for a good cause. Like Ross, Norton does not approve of uses and abuses of power, another theme in her novel.



## Key Questions

Although Norton is famous for her creation of exotic worlds, most are anchored in reality and based on careful research. *Key Out of Time* takes place on Hawaika, an island paradise like the South Pacific islands, especially Hawaii. Why do science fiction writers usually create people and places that strongly resemble those we know on earth? Can we truly empathize and become interested in the totally unfamiliar? Can we really imagine what is beyond our world of reference?

Has any science fiction writer been successful creating the completely unfamiliar, both in regard to people and environments? An examination of the popular *Star Trek* television series will show primarily humanoid characters and earthly settings. This may lead to a discussion of whether we are mostly looking for affirmations of our own experiences in literature and whether we are incapable of going beyond. Another approach to the novel could center on the concept of time travel and its ramifications.

1. Ross is the opposite of the Polynesian crew that is studying the mystery of Hawaika. While they are easygoing, he seems to be continuously angry and irritated. What is his problem? Why does he dislike the Polynesian girl Karana so much?

2. The battle between Ross and the sea monster is presented in great detail. What does this adventure foreshadow? What does it reveal about Ross's character?

3. The power structure on ancient Hawaika is badly out of balance even before the invaders from space arrive.

What is the reason for this unbalance?

Why are the Foanna, in spite of all their magic, disappearing?

4. The Baldies are an alien civilization that is highly developed technologically.

Why are they so menacing? What are the negative traits that Miss Norton seems to find in technology?

5. Critics have pointed out that Norton's worlds are dark and menacing, and that their protagonists do well if they survive. Is this true in this novel? Does it reveal a pessimistic view of the world and of the future? In what way? Is there something positive?

6. One of the chief rules for time agents is never to interfere with events in the past that might change the future.

Why is this so important? Did the Terrans really change the present of Hawaika? If they could return, would they find the same deserted planet?



## Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss Ross's resentment of Karara at the beginning of the book.

What are the reasons behind his resentment?

2. Is it all right for the Rovers to herd the salkars to their destruction?

3. One problem implicit in time travel is the question of what might happen to our world if the past were changed. Is it all right for the Time Agents to try to alter the past, thus changing the present, even if their aim is to prevent a civilization's destruction?

4. Ross is ashamed that he does not have telepathic powers. How does he turn this lack of ability into a strength?

5. The Foanna are the only three survivors of their race. Why do you think they want to stay alive? Why are they so secretive?

6. Are the Baldies evil? How do you define evil?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Norton has created a new world in 'Hawaika. Describe the setting and show how it affects the action of the novel. Try introducing some changes in the weather or the landscape. How would they make the story different?

2. Scientists are continuing to explore how dolphins communicate, and whether they have intelligence comparable to that of humans. Find some recent articles and books on dolphins and write a report in which you support or deny the possibility of future human communication with dolphins.

3. Norton makes frequent mention of the religion of the Hawaikans—the Shades and the Shadow, the Sea Maid, Jazia and Phutka, and the Foanna.

Describe the Hawaikans' religious beliefs. Compare these beliefs to Polynesian mythology.

4. Pretend that you have been commissioned to illustrate Key Out of Time.

Paint a picture of one scene from the novel, such as the first view of Hawaika or the temple of the Foanna.

5. What do you think will happen next to Ross on Hawaika? Write a story set ten years after Key Out of Time in which you tell what his life is like.



## Literary Precedents

Like Tennyson's lotus eaters (in "The Lotus Eaters," 1832), the people who are searching out Hawaika are drifting, giving up: "Perfect, like the rest of this," Ross disdainfully comments on the beauty of the planet. And as it is for the lotus eaters, the never changing, peaceful panorama which lacks human life and therefore conflict has sapped the energy from the crew until they are dispersed and wiped out by the storm. Only the fighters like Ross, Ashe, and Karana survived the disaster. In ancient Hawaika, the Fonatanna are also almost victims of the languid inaction of centuries, which has weakened them and made them a dying race.

Karana, perfectly in tune with nature, has a literary "sister" in the similarly named Indian girl Karana, heroine of Scott O'Dell's *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960; see separate entry). Like the Indian girl, the Polynesian woman is enough in tune with nature to survive the dangers of her environment and to learn to become one with it.

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Boston, G. K. Hall, 1980. Lists both works by and about Norton.

## Related Titles

Key Out of Time is the fourth and final book about Ross Murdock. The first book in the series is *The Time Traders*, in which a teen-age Ross is recruited to the Time Service and enthusiastically begins learning to deal with the past and with aliens. The second book, *Galactic Derelict*, sends Ross and Gordon in search of a spaceship wrecked on Earth in prehistoric times. *The Defiant Agents* focuses on Travis Fox, who is sent with a team of other Native American volunteers to occupy a planet before the Soviets can claim it. The first two books exhibit great enthusiasm about the unbounded possibilities of space and time travel. In the third book, however, humans are shown as incapable of handling important secrets from the past; this pessimism carries over into *Key Out of Time*, in which Ross is marooned in the past because he uses powerful technology that he has not yet mastered.



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