

The Scent of Magic Short Guide

The Scent of Magic by Andre Norton

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Overview

The Scent of Magic, published in 1998, is a story of two young women from very different backgrounds who meet and conquer an evil personage to save their country and themselves. Willadene, the Cinderella in the story, is an abused child who is saved from a wicked relative by a kind, older woman, an herb mistress. Mahart, a Sleeping Beauty, is the Duke's daughter. The two girls learn what their strengths are. As they learn to trust each other, their growing friendship saves them and the Duke from an evil left over from an earlier century and a different place.

About the Author

Andre Norton's writing career, which has spanned more than sixty years, began in high school. While editing the literary page for the Collingwood High School newspaper, *The Collingwood Spotlight*, she wrote short stories and her first novel. Her first published work, *The Prince Commands* (1934) was historical fiction written for young adults. This was followed by *Ralestone Luck* (1938), a novel she had written in study hall in high school. Norton is best known for her fantasy and science fiction, but she has also written pirate tales, Civil War stories, historical romances, and even a murder mystery. Her best-known fantasy series, the "Witch World" books beginning with *Witch World* (1964), is based on early English legends and the folklore of the ancient Celts. Fairy tales, such as "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella" are recognizable in Norton's fantasy plots set in imaginary worlds full of strange and wonderful creatures and ideas. Readers and critics recognize her as the Grand Dame of Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Born Alice Mary Norton on February 12, 1917, in Cleveland, Ohio, Norton grew up in a family devoted to books. Her father was Adalbert Freely Norton, owner of a rug company. Her mother, Bertha Stemm Norton, began reading to Norton when she was two. By age four she could follow along while her mother read *Little Women* and, as she began to read to herself, she preferred the *Old Mother West Wind* stories and the *Oz* books. A highlight of the week was a visit to the library, and good grades were rewarded by presents of books. Her sister was seventeen years older than she was, so a bond developed between Norton and her mother, with her mother serving as her critic and editor. After high school, Norton attended college for one year before the depression made it impossible for her to continue. She had hoped to be a history teacher but returned home to find a job and support the family. For the next twenty years she worked in the Cleveland Library System, as an assistant librarian in the children's section in all but two of the fortyseven branches. She became acquainted with people from many ethnic backgrounds, giving her an insight into different cultures.

She took a leave of absence from the Cleveland Library for one year just before World War II, to work at the Library of Congress as a special librarian on a citizenship project. She chose books to be rewritten so that people trying to learn English to get their citizenship could practice reading. This position ended abruptly with the beginning of the war.

Alice Mary Norton changed her name to Andre Alice Norton in 1934, the year her first book was published. She was a woman competing in a man's world, expected to write for young men, and a male name was supposed to increase her marketability. The *Sword Is Drawn*, a story about the Dutch resistance in World War II, came out in 1944. The Dutch government honored her with her first major award in 1946 for the realism of this story. In 1947 her first work of science fiction was published, a short story called "People of the Crater," which appeared in the first issue of *Fantasy Book*.

During the 1950s, Norton worked for Gnome Press, reading manuscripts. She was suffering from agoraphobia, a disease that brought her career as a librarian to an end,

and reading for Gnome Press and writing allowed her to earn a living while more or less an invalid. When Martin Greenberg, owner of Gnome Press, wanted to publish books that could be sold in series to high schools, she began writing *The Solar Queen* under the name Andrew North. During this same period she wrote her first science fiction novel, *Star Man's Son*, 2250 A.D., published in 1952. While continuing with Gnome Press, she wrote nine more science fiction novels, as well as editing four volumes of short stories. After leaving Gnome Press, she devoted herself totally to writing.

The decade of the '60s saw publication of twenty-two novels of science fiction and fantasy, including six books in the "Witch World" fantasy series, which would have about thirty-five books by 1998. The series contains short stories, two trilogies, and collaborations with other authors. The last book to date in the series is *Ciara's Song: A Chronicle of the Witch World* (1998). In 1966, Norton moved to Winter Park, Florida, because of her health.

During the '70s and '80s, Norton continued to write both science fiction and fantasy, gathering awards in both fields. Beginning in 1977, Norton has been honored with a major award nearly every year, thirty-five awards in all. She received the Gandalf Grand Master of Fantasy Award in 1977, the first woman to do so, followed by the Nebula Grand Master Award in 1984. Consequently, she has been deemed the Grand Dame of Science Fiction and Fantasy.

In 1996, Norton announced in an interview in *Tangent* magazine that by September she would have relocated to Monterey, Tennessee. Plans were underway to build a research library and retreat for popular fiction writers, the first of its kind. This dream was realized with the opening of High Hallack Genre Writers' Research and Reference Library, which had its grand opening on February 28, 1999. High Hallack is open to college age or older writers, engaged in genre-related writing. The library exists to preserve and promote writing in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, horror, gothic, mystery, romance, and western writing.

These genres are defined by Norton, founder of the library, as popular fiction.

Setting

The story begins with the tolling of the huge bell in the watchtower of Kronengred, calling all the citizens to begin their day.

Being poor, an orphan, and at the beck and call of a cruel guardian makes Willadene dread the day. As was common in towns of the Middle Ages in Europe, the castle of the Duke overshadows all in Kronengred. The Duke also overshadows the people, ruling through his Reeves and their guards in the sectors of the walled town. Commerce keeps the town humming. The common people live by the rules made by the Duke; the privileged live by a different code. Magic and superstition rule all. This is also a world of few machines, where everything moves slowly.

The Duke rules by right of birth. The law forbids a female ruler, and this Duke has come to the throne when the plague killed all other male heirs. The late Duke's daughter, the Lady Saylana, hopes to reign through her son if the present Duke were to die before naming an heir. This Duke, too, has only a daughter, the Lady Mahart, who cannot inherit the throne. From the beginning of the book, the medieval idea of a woman as a chattel, her worth being in what she can do to further the cause of her father or husband, is stressed. The idea of a girl or woman being responsible for herself, able to make decisions, is not entertained.

The clothing worn by the girls and women of the upper class immediately sets them apart as ornaments, to be looked at, cared for, used.

The exception is Halwice, the herb mistress, whose regal bearing allows her to blend with the upper class and whose compassion makes her trusted and honored by the common people. Her knowledge of herbs sets her apart. She has gained the respect of the Duke and his Chancellor, Vazul, for her honesty and knowledge.

The Sisters of Bright Star represent the religion of the community and are revered by both classes. The Sisters often go from door to door, soliciting food and money. In turn they care for the poor and homeless of the town. The observance of religious rituals strengthens the medieval feeling of the story. All the people want the blessings of the Sisters. The women of the Sisters of Bright Star can be called at times to examine others to establish their credibility in the society. One examined by the Sisterhood and found to be without taint is trusted by all. Halwice has this approval.

Willadene, another important female character, becomes an orphan when her father is killed fighting outlaws for the Duke.

Her mother, a midwife, dies in the plague epidemic. Had her mother lived, Willadene would have been trained to take her place as a nurse and midwife for the town. Instead, Willadene is given to Jacoba, her aunt and owner of the Wayfarer's Inn, and a bully whose moods change unexpectedly. Jacoba has complete control until Willadene reaches sixteen.

Social Sensitivity

During the sixty years that Norton has been writing for young adults, a woman's place in our society has changed a great deal. Norton shows sensitivity to the girls' place in the world she has created for them, but shows sensitivity to the world young adult girls live in today by allowing her protagonists to win freedom from the oppressive society they live in. By showing that girls can become self sufficient, Norton shows her respect for the young women of today who have many more choices than the girls who lived in a medieval society.

Norton is also encouraging the young women who read her books to make the most of the choices that are open to them.

Mahart is willing to learn from Willadene when she is sent to the castle to bring herbs and scents to be used as beauty creams. She is attentive and appreciative of the concoctions made for her by Halwice and presented by Willadene. She shows that she respects all persons, regardless of their stations in life.

Norton has her characters show concern for animals. Mahart saves her horse from the night crawlers and a painful death.

Ssssaaa is loved by all who are granted friendship.

Literary Qualities

Norton uses a number of literary techniques to create the mood and setting in the book. Her use of language and vocabulary of the period, some flashback, and more than one point of view allows the reader to understand the two classes of people from the medieval period. Her symbolism is fairly obvious, and accessible to almost any reader.

The names of the characters give a feeling of another time and place since most of them are unfamiliar. Willadene awakens to the tolling of the town bell and her bed, a straw pallet covered with rags, establishes her place in society. Her name evokes a wooded valley with perhaps a stream running through it. The town cannot be large since it is walled and built around the castle. Reference to the plague sets the time.

Willadene dresses in clothing that has been "cobbled down" in an effort to get a fit. Her hair is "lank," the hearth is "smoke-darkened stone." She is "one and twenty days away from Reeve listing as a full woman."

Readers are transported deeper into another time with each paragraph.

"Mahart" sounds romantic, suggesting her station in life. When Mahart says good morning to her father, it is "Give you a fair day, Father, and may fortune favor you," a formal greeting. She shows her lack of confidence with her father, something that will change as the story progresses. This also shows that she is subject to her father's will and feels she has few choices of her own.

Both Willadene and Mahart have memories of being loved and cared for by an adult. In times of stress, each girl takes heart from this, managing to continue toward her goal. Willadene remembers the smells of the woodlands and fields from a time when she went out with her mother to gather herbs. She sees the sense of Nicolas's lesson in woodcraft because of those memories, and exhibits a respect for his training when she gathers plants for their meal.

Mahart draws strength from memories of her nurse who was always there to comfort a small, frightened child. She shows that she cares for others by helping to feel the poor at the Abbey of the Star and helping her horse to safety when she is in Ishbi.

The story is told from the points of view of the two young women. These are different because of their different stations in life, and with the chapters alternating between the two, the reader is led toward the convergence of their paths and the defeat of the evil. Along the way the reader discovers things the girls have in common, things that allow their trust and friendship to be believable. The fairy story can come true. The girls can overcome and succeed on their own.

Symbols of good include the Star, its light, the plant Heart-Hold, and clean, wholesome odors. Symbols for evil include a flamboyant sort of beauty, unpleasant odors, the ferns in Ishbi, and the color green.

The clarity of the symbols is one aspect of the book that probably appeals to young adult readers.

The principle motif for the story is aromatherapy. Norton uses this throughout the story to anchor the reader to the familiar, if in a heightened form. For Willadene, with her talent for identifying odors, the sense of smell is central. Her nose helps her become an expert herbologist in a short time. She saves Nicolas from the evil when he is wounded because her sense of smell warns her that it is coming. Her nose leads her to Ishbi and Mahart in time to defeat the evil there. A second motif is magic, the ability to use plants and herbs for good or evil. Halwice makes a mixture of herbs to induce sleep with pleasant dreams for Mahart. Mahart's recurring dream becomes a symbol of her ability to overcome the physical and mental hardships in her path, and shows her there is a place she needs to search for.

Themes and Characters

The two major themes are special friendships between characters and maturation or coming of age. In addition are found themes of ethical behavior and caring for others.

Willadene and Halwice embody the theme of true friendship that crosses the barrier of age but is based on trust and mutual respect for each other. Halwice replaces Willadene's dead mother, giving her the training she needs to develop her talented nose. In a pre-industrial society, herb lore is the only medicine. Then as now, the person who is able to cure ills and repair wounds has the respect of all classes. Halwice is called to treat ills and wounds at the castle. For others, she acts as the pharmacist, dispensing the doctors' prescriptions. She has confidence in Willadene, leaving her in charge of the shop when it is necessary for Halwice to be at the castle and entrusting her with the care of Nicolas, a young man in the Duke's service, when he is wounded.

Willadene trusts Nicolas because Halwice obviously values him, and Nicolas gradually learns to trust Willadene in return.

Both friendships give Willadene confidence in herself and greater maturity.

Willadene and Mahart could not be farther apart in status or closer together in character. Each is an abused child. Both lost parents to death. Each has been treated as a nonperson because she is female. Willadene has the opportunity to grow up with the respect of the community snatched from her when her parents die. Mahart has lost her mother to death and her father has no interest in her because she is a girl and cannot inherit the dukedom. Yet each of the girls finds ways to learn and grow. Each has had someone to love her in her early childhood years—Willadene had her mother; Mahart had a loving nurse. Willadene and Mahart's friendship grows as they develop trust and loyalty.

Mahart is the Duke's daughter. Since she is only a girl, the Duke has paid as little attention to her as possible. Her nurse was her shelter when she was small, but now she is of age and living in the castle. The castle library has been her solace for years.

She has no one to direct her reading but she has educated herself in the history of the dukedom and her country. She has been allowed no contact with the court except through her companion, the Lady Zuta, who supplies her with much gossip. Mahart is somewhat aware of the court intrigues that swirl around her, but is still ignored by the Duke, her father. She expects to marry for the good of the dukedom, but hopes that it will be for her good also. Mahart has a mentor in Chancellor Vazul. He is there to help her understand the workings of the court and assure the Duke that she is acting responsibly and in his best interests. Her years of reading the history of the dukedom provide a background for his discussion and an understanding of the court gossip being supplied by Lady Zuta. Mahart is able to draw conclusions from this information that help her in her struggles with the Lady Saylana. These struggles are an undercurrent in each meeting between the two. Lady Saylana chooses bright colors and many jewels.

The Lady Mahart realizes that her own personal style lends itself to muted colors and a few carefully selected jewels. Lady Saylana chooses strong scents while Lady Mahart chooses light scents of the woodlands and the earth. Mahart's confidence grows when she conceives the idea of making a pilgrimage to the Abbey of the Star and is well received by the Sisters and the townspeople.

Beauty and evil seem synonymous in the Lady Saylana, although her beauty turns out to be false at the end. When the plague both widows and orphans her, she is unable to inherit the dukedom because she is female. Lady Saylana hopes to find a way for her son to inherit the throne so that she can rule through him so she plots the death of the ruling Duke. The war between good and evil is also a battle between love and hate, innocence and guilt, naivete and knowledge. Jacoba is the wicked relative, wanting Willadene only for the work she does and the bride price she will bring. Wyche, the man Jacoba has promised Willadene in marriage to, is used by the evil that possesses the Lady Saylana, using others for evil in turn. He, Figs (a servant in the castle), and Lady Saylana's son, Barbric, embody evil used by evil.

Each time Willadene is sent to Halwice for herbs for Jacoba, she manages to spend a little time learning from Halwice, enjoying the wonderful smells in the shop. Her job as a kitchen drudge at the Wanderers Inn is torture. Her sensitive sense of smell is assaulted during her waking hours, and all that saves her is the bag of herbs Halwice has put around her neck. Jacoba is verbally and physically abusive to Willadene and Figs. Willadene finally realizes Jacoba has kept her these five years for what Jacoba will get as a bride price when Willadene comes of age. With only twenty-one days to go, Jacoba feels secure enough to tell Willadene she is going to betroth her to Wyche, a much older man who terrifies Willadene. A chance to escape presents itself, and Willadene takes it, to be thrown into the plots and secrets of the Ducal court, where her special talent, that of being able to detect the difference between good and evil using her sense of smell, will be put to good use.

Willadene and Mahart—youthful, outsiders, girls—must battle alone and together, growing up and becoming confident in their talents. Willadene uses her gift for sniffing out good and evil to keep Mahart safe for a while and find her when that fails. Together the girls go hand in hand to defeat the evil, sure of each other and knowing they are both striving for the good.

Part of growing up is learning about romance. Norton supplies Willadene with the young spy, Nicolas. She saves his life once, then has to help nurse him back to health after another trip into the unknown to gather information. Mahart has Prince Lorien, a warrior more at home in the wilderness than the court. Lorien has defeated the Wolf and his outlaws, making the northern part of the dukedom safe for merchant travel. He is invited to Kronengred to be honored for this and to be introduced to Mahart. Perhaps he will become the needed heir. The court honors him with a banquet and ball; Mahart presents him with his coronet and leads the grand march. They discover they dance together as if they had been doing that all their lives. When Mahart is kidnapped from her bedchamber later the same night, the kidnappers expect to catch the Prince also. Mahart endures the hardships of being drugged, transported across the back of a horse

like a sack of meal, and being sent into the evil Ishbi with only her horse. She finds a sanctuary with food and water, a small place of good with evil all around, saves the horse and herself until Willadene can find them.

The most charming character is Ssssaaa, an otter-like animal with the ability to communicate with her human friends. Ssssaaa lives with Vazul, but is owned by no one.

She makes friends with Willadene and Mahart and warns Willadene when Mahart is kidnapped. She goes on the search for Mahart, and completes the defeat, after Prince Lorien, Nicolas, Willadene and Mahart, each, using his or her particular talent, contribute to the downfall of the evil in the person of the Lady Saylana.

Topics for Discussion

1. Willadene and Mahart each suffered the loss of her mother during childhood. Compare and contrast how this loss affected each of them.
 2. Discuss Mahart's changing relationship with: a) her father, the Duke; b) the Chancellor Vazul; c) the Lady Saylana.
 3. Explain why the Duke allowed Willadene, Mahart, Nicolas, and Prince Lorien to leave court and live in the north.
 4. Why does this story have a medieval setting instead of a modern one? How would a modern setting change the story?
 5. Nicolas is nicknamed "the Bat." What is the significance of this?
 6. Give examples of events that could be explained by modern day knowledge but appear to be magic to the characters.
 7. Discuss the Chancellor Vazul's attitude toward Mahart.
 8. Compare the religion of the Star to a modern day religion.
 9. Compare and contrast the personality traits of the Lady Mahart and the Lady Saylana.
 10. Compare and contrast the personalities of Prince Lorien and Barbric.
- â IDEAS FOR REPORTS OR PAPERS â
1. Compare and contrast the life of a noblewoman in medieval times with the life of the First Lady of the United States.
 2. What was life in a castle like? Do you think it was comfortable?
 3. Choose five herbs used today. Look in cookbooks to compile the list. Discover as much as possible about the history of each.
 4. Investigate aromatherapy. Describe any plants or herbs used today in aromatherapy.
 5. What was the plague and how was it spread? How did it affect medieval Europe?
 6. With only simple machines, how were items for everyday use made? Choose three handicrafts and find out how they were used in medieval times.
 7. Choose ten words from the book that enhance the medieval setting of the story. Use a book on word origins and write about the meaning of the words and any changes in meaning that have occurred.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Beginning in 1964 with *Witch World*, Norton has used the coming-of-age theme, with young female protagonists, for most of her fantasy novels. The latest in the "Witch World" series is *Ciara's Song: A Chronicle of Witch World*, which Norton coauthored with Lyn McConchie. Published in 1998, it furthers events from several of the other books in the series. The main character is a young woman named Ciara, and the story follows her family for several generations. The "Witch World" series deals with magic overcoming mechanization, with female witches able to counter invaders by being in touch with nature and connected to the land.

Many of the themes and elements found in all Norton's work were introduced in her first science fiction novel, *Star Man's Son, 2250 A.D.* In this book, a young mutant tries to keep warring tribes from making mistakes that led to the end of an older civilization and looks for his destiny. He has help from a telepathic cat and a young black leader from another tribe.

Authors that Norton enjoys include H. Beam Piper, Susan Cooper, C. J. Cherryh, J. R. R. Tolkien, Poul Andreson, Anne McCaffrey and William Hope Hodgson.

With over one hundred and fifty books in the Norton collection, a reader who enjoys her stories and style will have no trouble finding additional stories he or she will like.

Related Web Sites

Taddeo, Linda. "Who Is Andre Norton?"

Basic Information about the Grande Dame of SF-F." <http://www.andre-norton.org>.

Contains biographical information on Norton.

Zalenski-Ejgierd, Machiej. "Biography of Andre Norton." <http://www.andre-norton.org/anorton/anbio.shtml> (January 5,1999). An on-line biography.

Zaleski-Ejgierd, Maciej. "Awards Andre Norton Received." <http://www.andre-norton.org> (January 22, 1999).

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996